Information Bulletin #4

Should there be a U.S. Department of Education?

As a result of the November 1994 elections and the change in political control of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, the U.S. Department of Education may be abolished. Several conservative politicians and groups have put forth proposals to eliminate the Department, and these proposals are now being given serious consideration in Congress.

Opponents of the Department contend that it exercises undue influence over education matters in states and local communities. They argue that it is improper for there to be a federal education department since the provision of education is not explicitly specified as one of the powers of the federal government under the U.S. Constitution. Finally, they argue that maintaining the bureaucracy of the Department wastes valuable federal dollars. Two individuals who are advocating this point of view are William Bennett, who was education secretary during the Reagan Administration, and Lamar Alexander, who served as secretary of education under President Bush.

However, another former U.S. secretary of education during the Reagan Administration, Terrel Bell, has actively been promoting retaining the U.S. Department of Education. Mr. Bell recently wrote, “Only a national Cabinet agency can adequately direct attention to the immediate and long-term needs of our nation. Even its harshest critics have suggested some federal role in education. But anything that does not have the status, budget, staff of professional, and programming ability of a Cabinet agency is in sufficient.”

Former U.S. secretaries of education are not the only ones who are joining the discussion about the existence of the U.S. Department of Education. The debate in Congress has already begun on legislation to eliminate the Department with most support coming from conservative Republicans. Among those on the side of maintaining the Department are most congressional Democrats, President Clinton, and the current Secretary of Education Richard Riley, as well as some Republicans such as Senator James Jeffords of Vermont, the chairman of the education subcommittee of the Senate.

Why was the Department Created?

The law establishing the U.S. Department of Education in 1979 stated that “…the establishment of a Department of Education is in the public interest, will promote the general welfare of the United States, will help ensure that education issues receive proper treatment at the Federal level, and will enable the Federal Government to coordinate its education activities more effectively.” The constitutionality of a federal role in education is based on the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution which the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted as authorizing federal aid to education and to other areas not explicitly outlined as a federal power in the Constitution. Prior to 1979, the administration of federal education programs was conducted through an office in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

At the time of its creation, proponents of the Department argues that such a department would, at the very least, provide a symbolic show of support for the
importance of education nationally. They felt that, while education is a state responsibility and a local activity, there is a strong national interest in education since it directly impacts the nation’s ability to compete internationally and to defend itself in a time of war. Supporters also believed that by creating a Cabinet level position, there would be a direct line of influence and communication with the President on matters relating to education. Finally, proponents of a U.S. Department of Education believed that it made sense to consolidate the administration of most of the major federal education programs which, prior to 1979, were scattered throughout the government. It should be noted that the primary forces behind the creation of the federal department of education were teachers and other educators.

Arguments For and Against A U.S. Department of Education

Symbolism

Today, the more education a person has attained, the greater the likelihood that he or she will make a decent living. According to the National Assessment of Vocational Education, in the 1980s, the salaries of college graduates grew by 10 percent, while the earnings of high school graduates dropped by 9 percent, and the wages of high school dropouts fell by 12 percent. Anthony Carnavale and other economists have pointed out that the best chance for a person to make a good living is to get more schooling. Furthermore, today countries are competing more economically; and increasing the educational achievement and training skills of their citizens is seen as a means of preparing a better workforce. Based on data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), nearly every major industrialized nation is experiencing increasing educational attainment among its younger population. According to OECD, in 1992 nearly two thirds of youth age 25 to 34 in the major industrialized nations had attained upper secondary education while only 40 percent of adults age 55 to 64 had achieved this level of education.

Clearly, education is more and not less important today, both for individuals and for countries. Proponents of retaining the U.S Department of Education argue, therefore, that this is no time for the United States to abandon a national interest in education by abolishing the federal agency meant to highlight the need to improve American education. Opponents argue that education should be a state and local matter, not a federal interest, and that education can be improved without national attention stimulated by a federal department.

Proper Federal Role

The Department was created not only to highlight the need for improvement in education, but also to create a proper federal role in education. Currently, the federal government provides support for loans for 6,578,000 students and grants for 3,858,000 students to attend institutions of postsecondary education and training. This accounts for approximately half of the Department’s funds. The other half mostly provides aid for disadvantaged and disabled students in elementary and secondary education and for the general improvement of education.
Few opponents of the Department mention eliminating loans and grants for millions of students in postsecondary education. Instead, they usually aim their criticism at what they assert is the Department’s undue influence on elementary and secondary education. Opponents cite as examples of this undue influence the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which requires states receiving these funds to establish high academic standards, and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (formerly known as “Chapter I”), which also requires participating states to establish such standards for educationally disadvantaged children.

Supporters of the Department contend that the federal government ought to encourage the states to set high standards, and further point out that programs such as Goals 2000 and Title I are voluntary: states and school districts do not have to accept the federal assistance; if they choose not to participate in a program, they are not bound by the program’s requirements.

Opponents of the U.S. Department of Education argue that with the federal department comes the threat of a national curriculum which is counter to our country’s tradition of local control over education. Proponents to the Department counter that his charge is unfounded because the Secretary of Education is expressly prohibited, by law, from exercising “any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system…”

Opponents of the Department also say that federal programs are too burdensome on local school districts because they lead to too much paperwork. In this regard, they sometimes refer to the federal civil rights laws and the law concerning the education of disabled children (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) although they do not generally propose to repeal these laws.

Proponents of the Department counter that federal programs have been streamlined by the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (E.S.E.A.) which permits much greater flexibility in the uses of funds at the state and local levels. The Goals 2000 Act, as well as the new E.S.E.A., also authorizes, for the first time, waivers from federal laws and regulations. Proponents also note that unless civil rights laws and the education of the disabled statute are repealed, some federal agency will have to administer those laws.

Some opponents of the Department will also criticize federally-supported research projects as examples of misuse of funds. However, former president Nixon and many conservatives have advocated a federal role in research and data collection even though they have opposed broader federal aid programs. The usual argument made in favor of a federal role in research is that no individual state, university, or foundation will have the resources or long-term interest to sustain a research agenda in education.

**Efficiency of Administration**

During the debate over the Department’s creation, it was argued that it would lend to a more efficient administration of federal aid. When education programs were administered through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, there were 7,700 people employed in its Office of Education. Currently, the staff at the Department totals about 5,000, and this smaller staff administers more education programs and a
larger budget than did the Office of Education. Administrative costs are now only two percent of the Department’s budget. Also, the Department is the smallest Cabinet agency in terms of employees, but has the 7th largest budget. Opponents of the Department, however, still contend that, by its very existence, it wastes taxpayer money because of the cost involved in financing the bureaucracy necessary to administer federal education programs. They argue that, by eliminating the Department and scattering the administration of the programs among different federal departments and agencies, money could be saved.

Proponents point out that if the administration of programs is transferred among other department and agencies as some have proposed, especially for student aid programs, there may be no cost savings because the federal government will still need to pay the salaries of employees to administer the education programs no matter where they are housed. Some proponents have argued that instead of disbursing the Department’s programs, more education programs should be brought to the Department from other agencies because the Department has streamlined its administration of programs. The General Accounting Office found that 244 education programs are currently administered by the U.S. Department of Education, but 308 education programs are administered by federal department and agencies other than the Department.

One congressional proposal is to combine the Departments of Education and Labor. Although no bill has yet been introduced, the proponents of this approach argue that this combination will lead to greater efficiency. Some opponents of this proposal argue that such a merger would down-grade the importance of education and signal that the only education worth pursuing is one directly oriented to employment.

Questions

1. Is its value in symbolizing the increasingly important role that education needs to play in an economically healthy and democratic country important enough to justify continuing the U.S. Department of Education, or can education be improved locally without a sustained national interest?
2. Would eliminating the Department send a message to states and localities that the federal government is reducing its commitment to education at a time when they are engaging in efforts to revamp their education systems to help the U.S. become more competitive internationally?
3. Is there undue federal influence over elementary and secondary education, and would eliminating the Department remove any such improper influence?
4. Would the Department of Education be strengthened by moving education programs that are administered by other departments or agencies into the U.S. Department of Education?
5. Would combining the Education and Labor Department facilitate a realistic approach to both education and training?
6. Would research regarding schools and schooling be less likely to be undertaken if the Department of Education was eliminated?