Refashioning the Federal Role in Education
Keep It Focused - Keep It Simple

By Elizabeth Pinkerton

My views regarding the re-fashioning of the role of federal education reflect work that has been done in my district, Elk Grove Unified School District in California, and the work of my fellow educators - in California and other states. We work in our local school districts to improve the academic achievement of students, especially the ones who are most in need. Our local efforts are supplemented with assistance from state and federally funded programs, and there are a multitude of them that vary from district to district and state to state. My thoughts emerge from this local framework of providing services to students, and they are influenced by my experiences over the years with federally funded programs for education.

As I worked with my colleagues in preparing for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I have become aware of the diverse and unique needs and issues faced by districts across this nation. I do not speak for all my fellow educators, but my comments reflect the thinking of many of them. I have taken into consideration how things could be done differently at the federal level so that local school districts can be assisted with improving the education of all children. Academically effective programs differ widely from place to place, but there are many that do produce successful students. We need to carefully analyze the factors that make good programs work. Our priority must continue to be that we reach all children and provide an equality of opportunity for those who are most in need. In order to do this, we need to simplify what we do by focusing on what works, and we must abandon the practices that do not bring about the results that are required.

In reviewing ideas about how a new President and Congress ought to re-fashion the federal role in education, I have come to the conclusion that federal legislation, specifically, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, needs to be greatly simplified. In its present form, there is far too much in expectations and promises, and far too little in delivery and results. There is no need for the many federal programs that presently exist in a confusing overlap of purpose and implementation. As we continue down this road, we continue to add new programs, and this pattern is repeated within our individual states as state legislatures and governors do the same. Eventually, a form of block grants may be the only solution to the problem, although I do not see such grants as have been proposed as improving education for all children.

I propose four programs in the new ESEA - each to serve as an umbrella program under which most, if not all, of the present programs can be
subsumed. Each of the four program areas needs to have major accountability provisions, but the focus for all of them must be the improvement of the academic performance of students. The four programs I propose are as follows:

1. A Program for Children of Poverty
2. A Program for Children with Special Needs
3. A Program for Recruitment and Training of Teachers and Other School Staff
4. A Program for the Improvement of Academic Achievement

There are other important areas that need to be addressed, such as parent involvement, technology, and extended day and year, but it is my belief that none of these can or should stand alone. The four core programs can subsume these and all the programs that are presently in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. If any intervention, strategy, or program will be effective in the future, it must be integrated into one or more of these four areas. What does not fit into at least one should probably be eliminated.

The foundation upon which the 1965 ESEA was built must continue to guide us into the future. How we live in the year 2001, however, bears little resemblance to how we lived in the early 1960s when the ESEA was being developed. As we project our vision into the years to come, it is easy to see that this is a time for change. We must, however, stay true to the values and principles upon which ESEA was built - especially the leveling of the playing fields, assuring that all students have opportunities to learn and develop their potentials. We must also stay tuned to the more recent establishment of standards and strong accountability measures. In order to create the new vehicle that is required now and in future years for a new kind of federal role in education, we need to adjust our thinking. Though there are likely to be differences of opinion in how we do this, it is clear that a federal role in education has been clearly established over the years. It is a good role, and we need to continue it, for it is through federal guidance and assistance that ultimately we can expect educational equality for all children in our nation. It is especially for the children whose families do not have the resources to address educational needs that we must focus the energy of ESEA, and we must not let anything divert us from that direction.

A PROGRAM FOR OUR CHILDREN OF POVERTY

Head Start and Title I are the two main programs that address the children of poor families in every state, and almost every school district, across this nation. However, because of how these two programs developed, they have continued to function as two very separate, though powerful, engines, and each has its own design and purpose. The philosophies upon which they are based, and their plans, implementations, and evaluations, are like those of two big trains. They follow their own tracks and go their own ways. Though both may enter the same city, each only stops at its own station, and many times, neither knows the other even exists. Even when a school district is the delegate agency for Head Start, as many are, Head Start and Title I do not run smoothly on the same tracks. In most programs, there is no transition for the children and families served by Head Start, ages 0 to 4, to the kindergarten that awaits the five-year-olds at Title I schools. The folks who run Train #1 do not work with the folks who are responsible for Train #2, and often they don’t even communicate with each other because they hardly know that their counterpart in this educational venture exists. Their areas of focus are different, the program curriculum, instruction, and staff development are not linked,
and their governance structures are poles apart. There are huge differences in what each group calls a "teacher," and they have separate facilities, budgets, regulations, and compliance monitoring. Yet, in the guise of education for both children and parents, Head Start and Title I serve the same families, and they often do so at the same time - as when a family has both school-aged and younger children.

The goal of both poverty programs, Head Start and Title I, is to provide equality in opportunities. The focus for both is clearly on poor families, and they truly do reach large numbers of these families in every state in the nation. The programs are also similar in that both use up huge chunks of federal dollars, and that there continues to be controversy as to whether or not the investment produces results and is worth what it costs.

How is it that this separateness and lack of alignment has occurred? We have dedicated people working in both programs, Head Start and Title I - but here is the problem. It seems to be a matter of missed connections all along the way. Head Start people view their program as a community intervention to improve the lives of poor families. The problem is that they fail to make the important connection so that what is done in the early years for children is continued in kindergarten and the primary grades. The problem with Title I folks is that they see their program as a way for poor children to reach high standards, but they fail to reach back to those very important years before kindergarten. It is in those early years that children need to be introduced to the tools and learning associated with their emerging literacy and numeracy. This is what will help them become ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and ready to read when they enter first grade.

What can be done to resolve these differences? There is a simple solution, but it fails to take into account the political structure that created the two separate programs. This may not matter any more for it is the right time to move forward. Head Start needs to be under the Department of Education - as has been proposed by our next president. I believe that the place for Head Start is to be under ESEA, and I suggest that it be listed under Title I of ESEA - with the present program for children of poverty. One of the problems with our present Title I is that that this extensive program really does not have a name, and its lack of a proper name has hindered its implementation. Helping Disadvantaged Students Reach High Standards has only confused the issue because there is no common definition of "disadvantaged" students. Most school folks call the program Title I, and sometimes, regretfully, they even shorten it to Title, which is even worse. Title I suffers from its lack of a name for it is not only community members and parents who cannot explain the program, but it is often school folks who do not know the real purpose of the program.

This is one way that Head Start is light years ahead of Title I - everyone knows what Head Start is, or at least what it should be, because the name spells it out. In my proposed version of a new Title I, programs for all children of poverty should be able to move forward with a descriptive and classy name. I leave the choice of a name to those who are clever at devising appropriate names for programs, but this great program should have a proper name.

The new Title I, focusing on children of poverty and including pre-kindergarten programs, should be funded through a simple formula based on poverty. If free/reduced lunch works, it should be used because it is as timely and accurate as anything. Census figures are always from prior years, and the different calculations of poverty between federal and state agencies are confusing and lacking in fairness.

The concept of "hold harmless" should be banned and stricken from our vocabulary of serving
poor children, and we must eliminate pegging federal funding to the levels of state funding. All those practices do is create more money for rich states and penalize the children who live in poor states.

Head Start dollars could be based on a percentage of Title I dollars. If a district has 9,000 children designated as poor in grades K-12, then you could divide by 13 (for the grade levels) to project 692 children who would be four years old, and therefore eligible for funding from Head Start. If we reached to three-year-olds, there would be another 692 to consider. Programs for infants and toddlers (0-2) are small in number, and these could be worked into other health and community programs. Perhaps they could continue as competitive grants. Even Start should be rolled easily into both of these poverty programs. The dollar amount per student for Head Start could end up being less than it is now because administrative agencies at the local level could be eliminated. The additional dollars could be designated for the local school district that has the responsibility of managing the pre-kindergarten program, or the two agencies could work together in providing services for families.

I believe that all of what we now call Title I programs should be schoolwide, although I am aware of the controversy surrounding that issue. What must be made a major requirement and focus is the effective teaching of children who do not meet grade level standards. These students need to get caught up — with no excuses. They will not benefit from social promotion, and they will not benefit from retention, unless intervention is a major part of what happens to them. Children who do not meet grade level expectations need major interventions, not only during the regular school day, but also before and after school, on Saturdays, and at summer school or intersession. No student should be allowed to fail, and it must be our major goal as educators to never have children who do not learn at school.

The educating of the most needy, at-risk, poor children must be addressed, and that has to be an absolute requirement. We must insist that these neediest of our children be taught by highly qualified teachers — and that may mean providing incentives for our teachers and paying them more when they teach at our poorest schools. We have plenty of research about successful practices and programs, and it is time to require that federal funds only be used in ways that will bring about academic improvement. All the structuring pieces of Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Programs, for example, should be part of Head Start/Title I programs. There is no need to reinvent ourselves, and we can no longer practice and experiment with the education of our children who are at risk. It is time to move on to strategies that bring us results and allow our children to reach high content and performance standards in all areas. Children must be able to read fluently, pronounce the words correctly, understand what they read, compute and solve mathematical problems, spell correctly, write cohesive sentences, participate in discussions, and explain themselves orally. None of these expectations are new — you would find these in the
courses of study for our nation’s schools of a hundred years ago.

There are only two major changes in these requirements of the past. Our children today must also be technologically and computer literate, and we must have these expectations for every one of our children.

A PROGRAM FOR OUR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

We spend far too much time (and money) trying to sort out children with special needs. Finding the right formula for funding to make everything fair and square may, however, be somewhat essential to make sure that one special need does not get over-funded at the expense of another special need. Each special need has its own constituency, and these can even take on lives of their own. While we focus on trying to keep all the special needs cared for, lined up, and ready to go, we continue to find new ones that have to be addressed – and we start all over again.

A major overhaul is necessary, and in order to bring that about, I propose funding all special needs students under ESEA in what could be called Title II. These should not be competitive grants, just a funding from a simple formula that identifies students by need – special education, neglected, homeless, delinquent, tribal affiliation for Indian Education, English Learner, Immigrant, Migrant, and Gifted/Talented. ESEA funding could be a dollar amount for each student so designated, but not all dollar amounts need to be the same. These dollar amounts should be above the poverty amount from the new Title I for poor children. The only requirement should be that the money must follow the student. It must focus on what is needed to address the academic need, influenced as it may be by the disability, cultural situation, or capacity to learn.

This in effect puts IDEA and programs for children with disabilities into ESEA, and although I realize that there may be problems with this, it should be considered.

A PROGRAM FOR RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS AND OTHER SCHOOL STAFF

There is an immense teacher shortage facing us, greater in some parts of our nation than others, and greater in some subject areas than in others. We have plenty of history teachers, for example, but not anywhere near enough math teachers. A huge number of teachers will retire in the next ten years, but not enough young people are entering the teaching field. Other careers are enticing, some pay a lot more money, and we have failed to place teaching on that list of wonderful career opportunities for young people. Unfortunately, it is our own folks among us who have bestowed upon our profession this blanket of negative tone. Although the status of teaching as a career is better than it has been for years, we must continue to work on improving the image of the classroom teacher and let our profession rise to the top of the list of desirable occupations. Here is what we can do in regard to both recruitment and training.

Year round pay - Teachers need to get paid for twelve months. They can teach for ten months, spend two weeks in training, two weeks tutoring, and still have one month of vacation. It is time to set aside the ten-month school year and recognize that we have children who need to be in school for a longer time. It will be a good thing for teachers to join the rest of the world in working all year long. Teachers should also work an eight hour day of which five hours must be spent with students in providing instruction, two hours for
preparation, and one hour for tutoring, parent or student conferences, or home visits before or after school. It is time to do this, and the push to do so must come from the federal level. With the anticipation of additional pay, it is likely that teacher organizations will support the concept.

**Recruitment** - We need to identify prospective teachers when they are still our students in our schools – even as early as middle school, and definitely in high school. Future teachers are not hard to find – some bright young people have a natural affinity for helping others, and we need to showcase their talents and skills. We can assign mentors, even retired teachers, to these student “interns” that we identify to make sure they have a caring adult to guide them in this new venture. We can have our future teachers and leaders assist with the tutoring of younger students as community service, and later, when they become adept at this task, we can pay them through work experience programs or other funding sources.

We can work with institutions of higher education to plan the college years of these students. After they graduate from high school, we can employ them part time to work in our classrooms and in after school and Saturday programs where they would work in close proximity to their mentors and under their supervision. We could use the military model as a guide and implement great incentives for entering the future teacher and leader program and staying with it for a specific number of years.

Other types of recruitment will also be needed – paraprofessionals who have already shown their ability to work with students, mothers of young children who can only work part time, and professionals from other fields who need only minimal training to become excellent teachers. And, we need to look beyond the colleges and universities for the training of teachers. Perhaps a national model should be considered - similar to the types of entry level into other professions.

**Teacher training that is on-going** - A two-week training session each year, on contract time, will minimize the amount of time needed for teacher training that causes classroom disruption and the employment of substitutes. Training needs to focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Teachers need to know how to understand the performance data, and how to intervene at appropriate times when students are not learning as they should. This is an area that is greatly lacking among both new teachers and many veterans as well. Training of teachers has not focused on this important activity that utilizes the best procedures of differentiation of instruction – from kindergarten, and even pre-K, through grade 12. No matter if it is beginning reading or advanced calculus, all students are not in the same place at the same time, and the teacher needs to take that into consideration with every lesson, every day, all through the year.

I would call this area of focus the new Title III. It would include the present Eisenhower program, but also move ahead into new realms of teacher education and training as well as the recruitment of future teachers. Also included in this Title should be training for future administrators so that they can truly be instructional leaders as well as effective educational managers.
cial help and extended time, every child can learn, and every child will - if that is the expectation and if there are multiple opportunities for learning to occur. Standards have changed how we look at learning, and there is much that can be said to advance the idea of having a common base for our expectations.

Let us be encouraged by the many among us who know that children can indeed rise to high expectations. A national assessment program may have to be considered, and I would support it. We already have strong systems in place from state to state, and we are getting accustomed to the big concept of accountability. The issue of multiple measures continues to be troublesome because there are many differences among the measures that have been considered. Some form of standardized assessment seems to be the best option for showing growth as well as for comparing schools, districts, and states.

Incentives to achieve, and penalties when we don’t, both need to be put into place. These work in many situations, and we understand the concepts from our national obsession with sports. Bringing home the gold is a worldwide understanding, and there is no reason why we cannot put it into effect in our public schools. By rewarding teachers and students who excel, we will be able to make the general public understand what it is that schools are supposed to do for children. We must establish the indicators of success and let the world know when we reach them. We need the cooperation and partnership of our entire community to celebrate our successes - from the newspaper folks to the Chamber of Commerce to the Senior Citizens to the leaders of our churches and service organizations, and it is from a national level of leadership that this can occur. As we work together to improve the achievement of our children, so too must we celebrate the stories of our success, and this too must be from the leaders of our nation.

If this area is to be Title IV of the new ESEA, we could place many of the stand alone programs under it as well as competitive grants. Class Size Reduction has as its purpose to improve instruction, and so do after school programs such as the 21st Century Learning programs. The mission of Safe and Drug Free Schools is to have safe schools where children can learn, and Goals 2000, with its emphasis on a common set of expectations could be the heart of this section. We can also add overall parent involvement programs to this group, along with school renovation and construction – all the programs that help our students become successful learners and good citizens.

**SUMMARY**

An ESEA with only four titles may not suit everyone, but it simplifies the end result, which is improving the ability of the local school district to deliver quality education to all students.
Simplicity will encourage flexibility to meet the local needs of students, and it will provide a clearer focus for teaching and learning. It will set into place a high expectation for learning that is based on standards and assessments, and it will assure generous amounts of staff development and parental/community involvement. Responsible governance and program management, streamlined for efficiency in the implementation of services, will serve as the strong foundation upon which federal funding can be based.

Overall funding is an issue I have not addressed, but in these times of surpluses, discussions of tax cuts, and searches for new programs, it would seem that fully funding the federal education programs has to be a priority. Both presidential candidates expressed their support for the education of our children, and the increased appropriations for education enacted in December of 2000 seem to signal a bipartisan approach to the funding of education. A streamlined ESEA and full funding is a fine way to start the 21st century.