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Another Go at Federal Education

There is something beautiful and good in the vision of Cabinet rank for education. There is to be a seat at the table at last, in the heady company of defense, foreign affairs, and energy. There is a hopeful glimpse of new political power, built on a unified education constituency. Such is the spell wrought by the sorcery of reorganization.

Whether a remodeled government architecture ensures more quality and vitality in education in the United States is by no means clear. To paraphrase Thomas Huxley, size is not grandeur and territory does not make an educated nation. In the past three decades, federal education priorities have zigged and zagged and it is hard to put a name to what has come out of them, although there is evidence that federal leverage played a large role in opening up educational opportunity and that science curricula took a turn for the better. But given the built-in aversion to federal authority over the education process, expectations for striking change were too optimistic. The President sees balkanization of federal responsibility as a problem, and to an extent he is right. But pretentious efforts at reorganization are unlikely to make a difference unless driven by new consensus strategies, which to date have not turned up.

If little is to be gained by reorganizing federal education programs, the next question is whether something is to be lost. It is not an idle question, given the jarring news that the National Science Foundation is to be stripped of most of its science education programs. Although science education in NSF is not what it once was, it still commands and deserves respect in the scientific community. The prospect of its assimilation by the conglomerate department of education is unsettling, since no bill of particulars has been presented to show that a superagency would do more than distribute mediocrity uniformly.

Time was when science education made up half of the NSF budget, compared with only 8 percent of a larger budget now. If we understand the government's intentions, NSF's statutory charter for science education would not be revoked even though its programs would be handed off. Puzzling as that may be, what is even more troubling is the severing of science education from the major-purpose agency concerned with the state and progress of science. In a new education department dispensing $18 billion, the forlorn science education component would amount to two-tenths of a percent. One recalls a cherished footnote in federal budgets: "Totals may not add due to rounding." It is hard to believe that so frail a unit in so vast an empire could compete effectively in a contest of priorities.

In the absence of wars and space competitions, the importance of science education may not seem impressive to the reorganization experts. But only weeks ago the President was stressing the importance of science to our principal national purposes and calling for a new surge of technological innovation. He was right on both counts. If scientific research is a necessary public investment, surely it follows that science education is an equally necessary investment. Indeed, if a choice had to be made between more dollars for research and greater effort in science education, the case for the latter would be stronger. Human resources make or break investment in research.

Science education is not a priority that we have outgrown. As the knowledge base expands, increasing pressure is put on teaching. Both the proficiency of instruction at the secondary level and the effectiveness and competence of career counseling have profound meanings for higher education. A public which is asked to cope with difficult problems of choice in matters of health, consumerism, energy, and environmental balance can hardly assess uncertainty in the absence of better science education. There is a large and vexing job to be done. Government, which calls most of the signals for science, should be the first to understand this.—WILLIAM D. CAREY