

Education: New U.S. Commissioner Gets a Stronger Hand

The appointment last week of Francis Keppel, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, as Commissioner of Education has been welcomed publicly and privately by spokesmen for most of the major divisions and factions in American education, a chorus that does not always sing in harmony. This consensus effectively explodes a theory which was gaining credence, that the administration would not be able to persuade a first-class man to take a job that is famous in Washington for its frustrations.

The new commissioner has kept his own counsel on the terms of acceptance and any plans he may have for the agency, but those who know Keppel say that he would not have taken this job unless he had received firm assurances both of a freer hand in running the Office of Education and of stouter administration support on legislation than his predecessors enjoyed.

Last week, on a flying trip to Washington following his appointment, the new commissioner was reported to have seen top presidential advisers and officials of the Bureau of the Budget in talks that indicated an open-door policy for Keppel which has not applied to other commissioners.

When President Kennedy took office two years ago he placed such heavy emphasis on education legislation that the defeat in the last Congress of every one of his important education proposals is regarded as a particularly trying embarrassment for the administration. More serious, perhaps, a legacy of the losing legislative fights on the general aid bill in the first session of the 87th Congress and of the higher education bill in the second session was the rekindling of the church-state issue. Despite the rout on education in the last Congress and the particular delicacy of the church-state issue for President Kennedy, it now appears that the administration feels obliged to make good on at least some of its pledges of action in behalf of education. Certainly, the new commissioner will be

counted on to improve the performance of the Office of Education in the effort to break new ground in education legislation.

Keppel may, in fact, be the man to prove whether or not any commissioner can do much about the Office of Education, which its detractors claim is an agency that is influenced by a change in top administration about as much as a coral reef is affected by a shift in the wind.

The bill of particulars filed against the office by the harsher of its critics includes charges that the agency performs its original duties of gathering and publishing educational statistics slowly and not too well; that it undertakes no research that is likely to create controversy; and that it is overawed by Congress and dominated by national education organizations to such an extent that it has abdicated its responsibility for making educational policy for the nation.

Keppel's appointment seems to please particularly those who argue that the ills of the office are not chronic and that what is needed to

restore it to vigor is a tough-minded commissioner with a wide experience in education and the ability to deal effectively with the White House, Congress, and the professional educators inside and outside the agency.

Keppel's predecessor, Sterling McMurrin, who came to the office from the University of Utah and resigned last August after 19 months to return there to teach, was classified from the start as a higher-education man and was received with wariness by professional educators whose main concern is for elementary and secondary education, particularly in the public schools.

Keppel, on the other hand, holds a double educational passport. Within the leadership of higher education he is regarded as an able administrator and a sound man on educational policy. By professional educators he is regarded as a colleague.

Under Keppel, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, especially through its Master of Arts in Teaching programs, has come to be regarded as being in the movement to raise content at least to parity with methodology in graduate teacher education. Keppel's innovations and his public statements on education policy, however, have been regarded as constructive rather than inflammatory by the professional educators, who, as a group, have tended to be highly sensitive to criticism in the post-sputnik era.

As a consultant and committeeman Keppel is no stranger to the Office of Education. He had a major hand in reorganizing review procedures for funding in the Cooperative Research Program, under which the office works out cooperative arrangements with colleges and universities for research, surveys, and demonstrations. Keppel also has been organizing a committee for research on teacher education.

Views on Issues

There is always speculation on how a new administrator stands on the major issues facing his agency, and Keppel's membership on the 1960 Education Task Force, headed by Purdue's president Frederick Hovde and appointed by President-elect Kennedy to make recommendations on education programs, is regarded as clear evidence that Keppel favors substantial federal aid. The task force report proposed annual appropriations of



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\$2.3 billion for federal aid to education for both public schools and higher education, and it is generally believed that the report itself was largely written by Chicago superintendent of schools Benjamin Willis and by Keppel.

Hard on the heels of the official announcement of Keppel's appointment came an endorsement of the new commissioner from the 800,000-member National Education Association, the leviathan of professional education groups. The statement cited the task force report and pointedly specified that "Dean Keppel will receive the full support of the National Education Association in his efforts to secure enactment of that program of national support for public education which the President has rightly described as the most important item of domestic legislation." The statement certainly seems to put the new commissioner on notice that the N.E.A. will oppose any programs of support on new lines for private schools.

Interesting for the light it casts on Keppel's own set of priorities among federal aid proposals is a letter he wrote after he appeared last March before a House subcommittee during hearings on the so-called Improvement of Educational Quality Bill, which, if passed, would have provided a variety of programs for improving the quality of teaching, including scholarship grants for outstanding teachers.

In the letter, written to Education and Labor Committee chairman Adam Clayton Powell, Keppel indicated that he wanted to comment on an issue of basic policy brought out in the questioning at the hearings. He said, in part:

"The question had to do with priorities in considering the several proposals before your committee dealing with elementary and secondary schools: general aid, the Quality Act, adult literacy, etc. This issue goes to the heart of what one believes to be the most urgent problems that the Nation faces in which the schools can play a part. I have no doubt that the most pressing demand which should be put upon the schools is for a much more efficient and vigorous development of our greatest natural resource—school age children. Improvement of quality of our educational system through research and development and the upgrading of staff through H.R. 10145 [the quality Education Bill] is what the Nation needs first. General aid will have a long run, indirect effect on the quality

of schooling, but it seems to me that its major goals are to provide equality of opportunity and to give financial relief to hard pressed communities."

If Keppel adheres to these views, a more serious effort for a bill to encourage improvements in the recruitment, training, and placement of teachers can be expected.

Familiar Territory

As a new commissioner, Keppel will have the clear advantage of thorough familiarity with organized education at the national level, and with official Washington. But, say the pessimists, nothing can exempt him from the frustrations they claim are built into the office.

With about 1150 employees, the Office of Education is by federal standards a small agency. It is overshadowed in staff and budget by such sister agencies as the Social Security Administration, the Public Health Service, and the National Institutes of Health in that most loose knit of all departments, Health, Education and Welfare.

There have been efforts in the past and a new effort may be afoot to raise the Office of Education to departmental status and to elevate the post of commissioner to cabinet rank on the grounds of the importance of education to the nation and of the increasing federal expenditures on education and research. Past efforts in this direction, however, all have wrecked on the rocks of the doctrine that education is properly the affair of state and local authorities and private institutions and that any increase in federal activity or expenditure in education is followed inevitably by losses in local independence.

In the past, unusual displays of vigor or initiative on the part of the Office of Education have been opposed by many professional educators and attacked in Congress as attempts at federalizing education.

As for personnel within his own agency, a new commissioner has no license to clean house even if he feels that such an action is desirable. The Office of Education staff structure is a Civil Service monolith virtually to the top, and the charts show that a new commissioner can bring with him only an assistant or two.

McMurrin, who developed a reputation around Washington for candor expressed kindly, said the weaknesses of the office are due in part "to the char-

acter of the bureaucratic structure, where things move altogether too slowly," and also to what he called the "conservatism of people in education."

Inside the office the view is held by a number of the professionals that the Office of Education staff is a competent one which does well on routine administrative tasks and would do better on more demanding projects if it got clearer directions and stronger backing from policy makers in the administration.

In access to the makers of final decisions on legislation, Keppel should have a decided advantage over McMurrin, who was well regarded on Capitol Hill, but who operated throughout his nineteen month tenure under severe handicaps.

McMurrin's superior when he took office was HEW Secretary Abraham Ribicoff, who in the first session of the 87th Congress was occupied with legislation outside the field of education, and who in the second session resigned after winning the Democratic Senatorial nomination in Connecticut.

McMurrin's relative isolation is indicated by his never having seen President Kennedy save on formal occasions. McMurrin himself drew little criticism in Congress over the fate of education legislation, for those who favored federal aid felt that the administration had neither made clear which education measures it really wanted, nor was it ready to suffer the losses that a pitched battle for federal aid would have entailed.

McMurrin and Ribicoff appeared to work under an arrangement whereby the Secretary, so to speak, took care of the politics and the commissioner handled the education.

It is understood that Keppel refused to take the post so long as such a division of authority and responsibility was in effect. He is believed to have received a commitment that he would be the chief spokesman for education on Capitol Hill and would be guaranteed direct access to the White House on policy decisions affecting education.

It seems likely that the church-state issue, which is a political and not an educational problem, will greatly complicate Keppel's task. But the new commissioner knows what he is facing and he comes to the job at the special invitation of the President himself and on the basis of an understanding which presumably includes agreement on ends and means.—JOHN R. WALSH