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SCIENCE

Educational Leadership

The next few years are likely to see a good deal of consideration given to the role and strength of the U.S. Office of Education. Historically it has been a weak agency, and many educators have wanted it that way, preferring that strength be found only in the state departments of education and the professional educational associations. But now, with a proposed budget of $2.15 billion, twice that of the National Institutes of Health and over four times that of the National Science Foundation, the Office of Education has greatly increased fiscal responsibilities. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, the small but growing program of cooperative research grants, the modernized Vocational Education Act of 1963, and the Educational Facilities Act of 1963 have all brought larger funds and greater opportunities.

In some of its functions the Office of Education parallels NIH and NSF. All three support graduate students, make grants for research, allot funds for the construction of educational facilities and the purchase of equipment, collect statistics, and publish reports on trends. As a consequence, all three have opportunities for formulating policy and demonstrating intellectual leadership.

NSF and NIH have been given, and have accepted, this responsibility. The Office of Education has had a more passive role, for it has been less trusted, both by Congress and by its constituency, with the degree of policy-making responsibility given these other agencies. A formula for distributing its funds is often dictated by Congress, and its freedom of action has sometimes been limited to establishing minimum standards for plans developed by the individual states. Behind all this, of course, lies the fear of federal control of education, which is always worth keeping in mind but which in actual practice is more often a red herring than a real danger.

As for the future, the yeast is working throughout the whole educational world. Criticisms and recommendations are legion. The course-content-improvement idea has demonstrated its power in mathematics and the sciences and is spreading to other disciplines. New educational techniques are being extensively tried out. Congress has recognized that the national interest calls for greater national involvement in the whole educational effort. Clearly, major changes lie ahead. As they come, the need for educational statesmanship will increase. There will inevitably continue to be much decentralization of responsibility; our educational system is built that way and will continue to work that way. The few voices that are calling for a "national" system are too far out of tune to be heeded. But the feeling that all educational decisions should be made at the state or local level is equally out of step with current problems and requirements.

To the financial support they have distributed, NIH and NSF have added the stimulating effects of coordinated national planning. Neither has deprived its constituency of freedom to make a variety of choices; in fact both have developed new opportunities and have helped to build many parts into a more effective whole. An Office of Education much stronger than we have traditionally had could be a more helpful partner to these agencies in the fields where they overlap and could be a center of intellectual leadership for the rest of education.—D.W.