News and Comment

School Aid: New Strategy Urged by Policy Commission To Expand Federal Support for Education

One of the political curiosities of our federal system is that, despite a vast accumulation of evidence showing desperate need, the Congress consistently refuses to provide general support for the nation's public schools.

It has, however, made funds available in fairly generous amounts for categorical educational undertakings, such as vocational training, education of the physically handicapped, and education in federally impacted areas. For years, the country's major public education organizations have fought against such earmarking of federal education funds and have urged unrestricted allocations for expanding and improving the nation's school systems. Last week, however, in a bow to political reality, the Educational Policies Commission—which is an elite policy planning body of public education organizations—reversed its traditional stand and urged its constituents to exploit Congress's demonstrated willingness to appropriate money for specific programs.

Educators, the commission stated, must retain general aid as a long-term goal, "but meanwhile they must consider what alternatives are available.

"The most obvious alternative is to improve the dispensing of specific aids. This is not ideal educational policy, but democracy advances through willingness to adapt to present realities. . . . Of every existing or new proposal, educators and federal policy-makers should ask how it may be made to (*a*) put more money into serving (*b*) more categories and (*c*) lower levels. A constant and unremitting effort to move every educational program in these three related directions might well result, over a period of time, in improvements through which education might obtain many of the benefits of a general program of federal aid."

The 20-member commission, which consists largely of persons appointed by the executive committees of the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators, made its recommendations in a 30-page pamphlet, "Educational Responsibilities of the Federal Government" (35 cents, National Education Association, 1201 16th St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20036). As the commission is constituted, its recommendations are purely advisory, and it would not be unreasonable to expect that its two principal parent organizations will find it difficult to abandon their long-time insistence upon directing major efforts toward general aid. But the commission came to its task with much prestige and many battle scars from the educational wars in Congress, and if it is ready to switch tactics, it cannot help but have a profound influence upon the organizations it is advising.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the report is the careful distinction that it draws between education and the politics of education. "The Congress," it notes, "must remain the scene of the struggle for money and determination of policy, and no proposal has been made which would simplify or eliminate the political maneuvering that inevitably occurs. Similarly, the role of the federal Judiciary is not likely to alter. . . . In the Executive Branch, however, there is both the possibility and the need of change. Some device is needed by means of which education may be within the range of the President's personal attention and through which the affairs of education may be considered in relation to general governmental policy. How this may be done is considerably complicated by the fact that some educational matters are political and others are not. . . . There are many educational functions . . . which are not and cannot be performed in isolation from the political ferment of the national government. These have to do principally with budgeting and appropriating funds. Among the more evident of the activities in this category are the preparation and approval of the annual budget for the U.S. Office of Education and the drafting of legislative proposals for federal participation in the support of education. More subtle functions of this type, which are needed but are not now performed at all, involve the setting of annual legislative goals in the light of an annual review of needs. To take generalized goals and translate them into a program of specific action requires a blending of professional considerations on the one hand and political considerations on the other."

Proceeding with its distinction between the political and the educational, the report, in effect, takes the position that in their quest for general aid educators have been throwing themselves against a politically impregnable line, and that realism now calls for maintaining the same objective—more federal money—but attaining it by a flanking movement: "existing programs," the report notes, "have their principal effect in scientific and technical fields and in higher education. It would be possible to offset these imbalances, at least in part, by amendments or new programs which would direct assistance to the elementary level and to broader areas of the curriculum. A giant step forward would be the addition of the elementary school or, if still greater specificity is required, of the teaching of the basic skills of reading, writing, and computation to the categories receiving federal support. All these skills, so vital to subsequent learning, are learned with reasonable economy primarily in the elementary school. Large-scale federal support for instruction in basic skills would, by the nature of the processes involved, extend to many areas of school life and could be of inestimable benefit to the quality of elementary education. . . . Similarly, it would be possible to extend support to other specific subjects—social studies, art, literature, music, physical education, and others—and to additional segments of the school program—summer schools, libraries, services for the culturally disadvantaged, and the like."

The view that "it would be possible" to do all this may sound unduly optimistic when it is recalled that Con-

gress tends to measure higher and lower and technical and nontechnical education by different standards, and the same applies when it is recalled that the problems of church and state, segregation, and fiscal conservatism continue to hang over federal aid to the lower levels of education, regardless of whether the aid is specific or general. Nevertheless, there is much encouragement to be found in the good legislative prospects of the administration's poverty program, which, in its emphasis on education at the lower levels, might have had a far different reception if it were blended into a general aid program.

Since there is still some life in the venerable argument that federal aid inevitably brings federal control, the commission pointed out that the federal government's principal venture into general aid for education—aid to federally impacted areas—has never evoked complaints of federal control. (And, curiously, many congressmen who regularly oppose general aid on the grounds of federal invasion of local prerogatives, appear to be quite pleased to bring home such aid to their own impacted district.) However, the report argues, the Congress, in its aversion for general aid and its insistence upon pinpointing its assistance to education, is inadvertently creating federal interference in local educational activities. When funds are made available on a matching basis for specific programs, the Congress lures educational systems into depleting one area to qualify for support in another. And, the report adds, under the impacted aid program "many comparatively wealthy school districts receive funds while poorer ones do not."

In keeping with its emphasis on the importance of recognizing the political realities of federal aid to education, the commission rejected the proposed establishment of an independent federal education agency on the grounds that it "tends toward the very thing most educators want to avoid—control—and shows little promise of achieving what they most need—money." Its preference in the way of a new institutional arrangement, it concluded, would be a cabinet-level Department of Education to give "education a higher status at home and abroad and more direct access to the Executive policy-making machinery." There is little danger, it said, that such a department would undermine state and local control. "The far greater risk is the erosion of the power of education caused by insufficient support, for penury is a particularly vicious form of control, causing schools to choose not the right alternatives, but the cheap. Associated with this risk is the impact of specific federal programs which favor parts of the curriculum. The real dangers of control, then, are functions, not of federal administrative structure, but of federal policies."

It is too soon to say whether the commission's recommendations will be reflected in the policies and the lobbying activities of the public education organizations. But the educators have shown themselves to be politically educable, which is encouraging after many years of evidence to the contrary.

The members of the commission are: Arthur F. Corey, chairman; Margaret Lindsey, vice-chairman; Roberta S. Barnes, George B. Brain, Samuel M. Brownell, William G. Carr, Forrest E. Conner, J. W. Edgar, Wendell Godwin, Clarice Kline, Rachel R. Knutson, Max Lerner, James D. Logsdon, J. Win Payne, James W. Reynolds, Lina Sartor, H. E. Tate, O. Meredith Wilson, and Robert H. Wyatt.

—D. S. GREENBERG

N.S. Savannah: Trouble-Ridden Nuclear Ship Gets Under Way with New Crews and High Spirits

Two weeks ago, the nuclear ship *Savannah* completed her maiden transatlantic voyage and pulled into Bremerhaven. Repeating a pattern of fanfare established in the *Savannah's* calls at domestic ports, there was great ceremony. Fireboats and small craft filled the harbor, tooting their whistles, welcoming her in. Planes flew low overhead. Flags waved. A crowd applauded. A German police band played the German and American national anthems. (In Boston, somewhat indiscreetly, a firemen's band had led off with "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.") And officials, German and American, made speeches reassuring each other as to the historic importance of the occasion. But whether Germany's welcome for the *Savannah* is a tribute to a scientific feat or a pat on the back for the vessel's awakening from a public relations nightmare is a little hard to say. For the *Savannah*, designed to be the harbinger of a nuclear maritime age, became landlocked in a labor dispute of such complexity that the technical problems of nuclear propulsion look simple by comparison.

Originally conceived during the Eisenhower administration as a demonstration of America's intent to make peaceful use of the atom, the *Savannah* project acquired a further objective—encouraging the development of a nuclear merchant marine. A nuclear merchant fleet, it was thought, would secure the future of shipping against a possible world-wide shortage of conventional fuel. The possibility of freeing ships from dependence on bulky fuel supplies, enabling them to make faster runs and carry larger cargoes, was to inspire a lagging American merchant marine. The *Savannah* was, in contradiction to its primary peaceful purpose, to prove the feasibility of a nuclear merchant marine as a backup to a nuclear navy in the event of war. It was to fortify American prestige against the possibility of a Russian maritime coup on the order of Sputnik. And, finally, it was to precipitate and solve all the problems—technical, legal, political, and psychological—that would obstruct the development of commercial nuclear ships. Ship and reactor design, and the integration of the two, would have to be worked out. Crews to man and service the vessel would have to be trained. Hazards to crew and public from radiation had to be eliminated, and the public had to be persuaded of the ship's safety. Running an atomic ship in international waters would require new and elaborate agreements on such matters as the disposal of radioactive wastes. A variety of measures would have to be taken to insure that the ship had the necessary access to and acceptance in the ports of the world. The rationale for the *Savannah*, in short, was something like the rationale for exposing preschool children to mumps: it will be rough any time, but it's better to have them while you're young.

Construction of the *Savannah*, a 595-foot (180-meter) combined cargo and passenger ship, was authorized in 1956, under the direction of a so-called Joint Group of representatives of the Atomic Energy Commission and the Maritime Administration, an agency of the Department of Commerce. In the beginning, aside from unsurprising difficulties with construction schedules, the project proceeded fairly well. The contract for