Education: President's Message Outlines Program Concentrated on Aiding the "Disadvantaged"

In the education message he sent to Congress last week President Johnson asked for a down payment on the program to create a Great Society which he had sketched in his State of the Union message. He also provided a prime example of the Johnsonian legislative style.

The message contained several big and ambitious proposals (some of them novel), with the whole so artfully constructed that it could well achieve one of its framers' presumable intentions—that of disarming hard-line opposition in Congress and among the education pressure groups which in the past have contended so bitterly over federal aid.

The title of the message, "Toward Full Educational Opportunity," is a phrase taken from a section in which the President offers his rationale for his new program. Pointing to the substantial legislative accomplishments in behalf of education in the last Congress, Johnson said, "I propose that the Eighty-Ninth Congress join me in extending the commitment still further. I propose that we declare a national goal of *Full Educational Opportunity*.

"Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take.

"We want this not only for his sake —but for the nation's sake.

"Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness—for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace; not our productive economy—for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government—for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant."

Rephrasings of Jefferson and Whitehead on education are not new to political rhetoric, but the President—if initial reactions to his education message can be trusted—seems to be on the way to making education as politically irreproachable as motherhood and sunshine.

The President, in a fair example of his method of playing the political middle against both ends, even quotes that redoubtable conservative, the late Senator Robert A. Taft, to the effect that "education is primarily a state function —but in the fields of education, as in the fields of health, relief and medical care, the Federal Government has a secondary obligation to see that there is a basic floor under these essential services for all adults and children in the United States."

The four "major tasks" set forth in the message are: (i) to bring better education to millions of disadvantaged youth who need it most; (ii) to put the best educational equipment and ideas and innovations within reach of all students; (iii) to advance the technology of teaching and the training of teachers; and (iv) to provide incentives for those who wish to learn at every stage along the road to learning.

To paraphrase Sir Alec Douglas-Home's best-remembered phrase from the last British election campaign, President Johnson in his message gave both a menu and a price list. His budget request for education in fiscal 1966 will total $4.1 billion, including some $1.1 billion to finance programs established by the last Congress. New programs recommended in his message would cost some $1.5 billion in new obligational authority (money obligated but not necessarily spent during the fiscal year).

Aiding the Needy

About $1.25 billion of this would go into programs included in the administration's Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (S. 370), which, as the title indicates, will benefit education below the college level. Another $150 million is asked for projects for preschool children to help overcome the academic handicaps which are the lot of children from urban or rural slum backgrounds. This money is requested under the existing Economic Opportunity Act (the Poverty Program).

A round billion in new funds would be earmarked for use in programs of education for school-aged children from low-income families. Funds in the first year would be distributed as federal grants based on 50 percent of a state's annual expenditure per pupil, multiplied by the number of school-aged children from families with incomes under $2000 a year.

Local school districts will be eligible to participate so long as payments are used in programs "designed to meet the special educational needs of educationally deprived children in school attendance areas having high concentrations of children from low-income families." The programs also must be of sufficient scope and size to have reasonable prospects of success.

Imbedded in the legislative phrasing of the section on applications is the provision designed to neutralize the church-state issue. Local public school authorities may qualify for funds so long as, "to the extent consistent with the number of educationally deprived children in the school district of the local educational agency who attend nonpublic schools, such agency has made provision for including special educational services and arrangements (such as dual enrollment, educational radio and television, and mobile educational services) in which children can participate without full-time public school attendance."

The "shared time" device which has been put forward as a means of ending the impasse over use of public funds to benefit private schools is, therefore, embodied in the proposed legislation. Indications from the National Education Association, which has hitherto insisted that public funds go only to public schools, and the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which has insisted that private schools share in any major federal aid program, are that the shared time principle will be accepted. The constitutionality of such aid—at first blush, at least—seems fairly assured, since it will no doubt be argued that the aid is going to the individual child in a nonpublic school rather than to the school. An estimated 15 percent of all funds in the bill would benefit students in nonpublic schools.

The shared time principle also applies in another section of the bill, which authorizes appropriation of $100 million for the creation of "supplementary education centers." These centers would offer centralized facilities—for science laboratories, language laboratories, music and art education and counseling, and health and welfare services—for both public and nonpublic schools. The centers would not only provide services not available in adequate quantity or quality at separate schools but would also serve as models for regular school programs. The centers would be operated by one or more local education authorities (public) and by other institutions, such as universities, state education departments, nonpublic schools, museums, or other cultural institutions or organizations.

Another $100 million would be earmarked for purchase of books, periodicals, and other materials to bolster library resources in both public and private nonprofit schools.

The President is also requesting $45 million in addition to the $25 million of the regular budget to finance the Cooperative Research program. The Cooperative Research Act authorizes the Commissioner of Education to enter into contracts and other agreements with institutions of higher education and with state education agencies to conduct research, surveys, and demonstrations on education. The President asks that the act be amended to provide for training of research personnel and otherwise to broaden its provisions. The aim of the increase in funds would be mainly to permit construction of centers to improve teaching in the schools. The goal would be a network of federally supported but state- and university-operated educational research labs.

Expenditure of $10 million this year is also recommended, in the message, for measures to strengthen state departments of education; these are, in many cases, undermanned and underfinanced in terms of the burdens of planning, leadership, and supervision which are being given them.

While some $265 million in new funds is asked for higher education, the shape of the program is not yet as clearly defined as in the case of the requests for elementary and secondary education. As this was written, the legislation embodying the proposals for higher education were still, according to one agency observer, "in the design stage."

The President, however, did give the general outlines in his education message. Sure to stir the most comment and controversy is his proposal for a big program of scholarships for students from low-income families. The area of undergraduate scholarships is one where even the most secure of the research-supporting agencies have feared to tread, but the President's bid is being made, in this case too, in the name of the needy and the national welfare.

The scholarships are not expected to be munificent—the average predicted is $500 a year. But the planners' theory seems to be that needy and able students can put together a scholarship, funds from federally-backed loans, and income derived from jobs under the work-study program provided by the poverty program and make ends meet.

Another proposed innovation is help for small colleges. The details remain to be spelled out, but it is clear that the intent is not simply to keep marginal small colleges afloat with federal funds but to help them improve by encouraging them to establish closer ties with universities and to upgrade faculty and curricula through a variety of programs.

Aid requested for higher education will also include funds to bolster library resources, grants for university extension activities centered on community problems, and special programs to attack shortages of needed manpower, specifically to increase the supply of librarians and teachers of the handicapped.

In scope, cost, and audacity the President's education program surpasses the first Kennedy message on education of 4 years ago. The Kennedy message was shorter and phrased with slightly more elegance, but it was remarkably similar in spirit. The situation, however, is now entirely different.

When President Kennedy took office after his eyelash victory, he faced a House of Representatives containing 263 Democrats and 174 Republicans and a coalition of conservatives eager to do battle. The majority in the new Congress is 295 to 140, and—perhaps more important—many of the key figures in the old coalition have departed.

General Aid Derailed

Kennedy's Catholicism added a volatile element to the church-state issue. When he asked for a 3-year program of general federal assistance for public elementary and secondary schools, to be used for both classroom construction and teacher salaries (it would have cost $666 million the first year), the advocates of federal aid to private schools in and out of Congress revolted, and an impasse developed. Kennedy bills expanding vocational education programs and providing funds for the construction of academic facilities for colleges and universities finally fared better, although neither was passed until after the Johnson succession.

Johnson's chances for early success seem better. Not only does he enjoy big and, by every sign, friendly majorities in both houses of Congress, he has chosen to ask for sharpshooting "categorical" programs of aid rather than general aid, and thereby appears to have defused the most explosive parts of the controversy over federal aid to education. There seems to be agreement, even among Republicans, that this will be another big legislative year for education.

In advocating his poverty program, the President successfully appealed to the national conscience and the national self-interest. With his new education program he also is calling for action in an area of great need, but while the problems are fairly clear-cut, the solutions are still far from certain.

There is not much argument, for example, that a preschool program is needed if the slum child is to get any sort of even start with the middle-class child, with his nursery school and day camp experience, his trips and vitamins and good medical care, his books and records and big ration of parental solicitude. But the question of what to teach the slum child and how to teach it is far from settled. And under the pressure of getting programs started, preschool programs may turn into federally sponsored day-care projects, perhaps cleaner and better run than those that preceded them but hardly the answer to the problem of equalization.

In some urban school systems, especially in places like New York, experiments in teaching the disadvantaged have produced much useful experience, but there have been few miracles. In most systems, however, programs for teaching the educationally deprived are in the rudimentary stage. In many places, campaigns to persuade dropouts to return to school have been revealing failures, since the programs offered did not meet the needs.

The schools are being drawn inevitably deeper into the area of welfare and social problems, where many educational problems have their roots, and it is understandable that many educators are reluctant to see this happen.

School administrations are, in most places, highly centralized, and school officials by habit are inclined to be jealous of their authority. They tend to be suspicious of outsiders—welfare or social workers, or professionals in the arts or professions—who may be instrumental in making programs for the disadvantaged work. It is difficult for the ordinary school system to provide the resources, the flexibility, and the autonomy which seem to give the program for the disadvantaged its best chance of success.

The new educational proposals are filled with good intentions and much promise, but it is certainly up to Congress now to start asking hard questions to assure itself that the very large amounts of money involved can be spent effectively.—JOHN WALSH