

Education Research: HEW Auditing Two SRI Contracts

Elliot L. Richardson, Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), is awaiting the results of an audit of two of the largest preschool educational evaluation contracts ever let by his department. Under scrutiny are contracts totaling \$12 million which HEW has awarded since 1968 to the Stanford Research Institute (SRI)—a California think tank known for its industrial and defense research.

The investigation, which will also cover HEW's management of the contracts, is in response to charges made last May by two investigators associated with Ralph Nader that the money had been "squandered," that SRI's reports had been "valueless," and that 1 year and \$1.8 million of the project had been, at best, "a learning experience for SRI." The charges relate to the larger issue of how much money the government is willing to invest in building up educational research capability in the private sector.

Richardson is not taking a stand on whether the charges are found accurate, or likely to be. He only said the allegations underscore the need for review, which will be conducted by various HEW officers and the in-house bookkeepers, the HEW Audit Agency.

The two SRI contracts provide for a massive collection of data, analysis, and evaluation on two nationwide programs: Head Start, which last year enrolled 380,000 preschoolers, and Follow Through, which last year gave educational aid to 78,000 underprivileged children from kindergarten through third grade. Both programs are regarded by educators as key tests of the notion that early aids can improve poor children's educability, and SRI's job was to study variations within the programs to see which worked best. Through the Office of Education (OE), SRI has received an estimated \$10 million for Follow Through evaluation. Through the Office of Child Development (OCD), SRI has received an estimated \$2 to \$3 million to date for Head Start.

According to the charges made by Daniel Guttman and Barry Willner, of the Center for the Study of Responsive Law, OE gave the Follow Through contract to SRI in 1968 without fulfilling the HEW requirement of keeping a written record of the basis of the award. Moreover, according to the investigators, what exactly was expected from SRI was never made clear. After 1 year and \$4 million, SRI did not submit a plan on time to OE. HEW evaluators found SRI's performance to have been "a purposeless and expensive collection of immense amounts of data." Nonetheless, OE subsequently renewed the contract.

In 1969, SRI contracted with OCD for the Head Start evaluation project. (At the time, SRI was trying to increase the share of its \$65 million budget devoted to educational, urban, and behavioral problems.) But SRI's interim report on the Head Start study, according to the Nader investigators, "plagiarized" a previous government report and also "lifted, almost word for word" passages from an earlier work written by the Head Start evaluation project manager in OCD, Dr. Lois-ellin Datta.

Two years and \$1.8 million after the contract began, a blue-ribbon panel of educational experts, called in by OCD to look over the work, concluded that SRI "does not currently have the staff with the competence in education research, compensatory education, and early childhood development according to the charges."

Responding to the Nader allegations, SRI, in a press statement, said its work with HEW "has been carried out in an efficient and competent manner. . . . By its very nature, pioneering work of this type is without precedent in size and complexity, often requiring trial and error during its execution." The statement rebutted the outside experts' negative opinions on Follow Through and Head Start by saying "every HEW-convened panel to date has concluded that the strengths of its performance in these projects have considerably outweighed any weaknesses."

Richardson, in a letter informing the Nader investigators of the audit, said "no further contracts for these projects . . . will be made with SRI," until after the HEW examination is finished—a date now expected to be several months away.

There is a bigger issue raised by HEW's self-examination in the matter of these two contracts, and one which will become more important as educational research, with the establishment of a National Institute for Education (see *Science*, 23 June), comes increasingly into vogue. Alice Rivlin of the Brookings Institution, who was assistant secretary of HEW for planning and evaluation until 1969, explains that when the Head Start and Follow Through national programs were launched in the 1960's a competency to evaluate their effectiveness simply didn't exist anywhere in the country. Speaking generally about the decision to spend a lot of research money, Rivlin says, "The government was consciously investing in building up a capability in this field. And there well might have been some waste in the process, just as there was in the early days of defense contracting."

From SRI's standpoint, the two HEW contracts came in at a time when SRI's defense work (SRI was then the fifth largest nonprofit defense-research contractor in the country) was under heavy attack from antiwar groups on the Stanford University campus. In May of 1969, the university's trustees voted to sever ties with SRI; and SRI, like many other defense and industry-oriented think tanks, went its own way, emphasizing the work it would undertake in the quest for domestic, "relevant" research.

Regardless of which side is right, there is a large amount of money involved. Willner and Guttman pointed out that the \$12 million or more spent on SRI could have financed a whole class of students through Stanford. SRI, in its press statement, actually claimed the money had gone, indirectly, to aid the poor. When the studies are complete, the statement said "perhaps our society will have found some ways to increase the opportunities for poor children to experience self-confident, productive, and constructive lives."—D.S.