

After 20 Years, Education Programs Are a Solid Legacy of Great Society

By GENE I. MAEROFF

Twenty years ago President Johnson put forth his vision of a Great Society, forever altering the relationship between the Federal Government and education.

The Government began pouring what has amounted to billions of dollars into programs to aid impoverished, handicapped and otherwise disadvantaged students, spending that has become firmly entrenched.

"The legislation put the poor and the minorities on the educational agenda and kept them there," said Francis Keppel, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who as Commissioner of the Federal Office of Education helped Mr. Johnson shape the new laws. "Until 1965, the focus was not on trying to adjust the schools to serve the needy, but on requiring the needy to adjust to the schools."

Opposition of Administration

The Great Society programs have withstood repeated attempts by the Reagan Administration to dismantle them. President Reagan has maintained that many Federal programs aimed at elementary and high schools have not worked well enough to warrant the expense, and that college aid programs have helped many students who ought to be paying a larger share of their own costs.

Even if the programs were to die, the Federal Government's impact on education has gone beyond financial aid into shaping current educational philosophy. Many teaching techniques and the widely held belief that educational assistance is most effective in the early childhood years are direct results of Federal programs.

In addition, the Great Society educational programs have played a key role in changing the face of schools today. The programs have been used to finance desegregation as well as to aid handicapped and non-English-speaking students who formerly received no special attention.

Nonetheless, while experts on education say the programs have not been the dismal failure depicted by Mr. Reagan, they assert that the programs have not come close to fulfilling their initial goals of eliminating disadvantages that stood in the way of an equal educational opportunity for all Americans.

Initial Enactment of Programs

The key educational programs of the Great Society were enacted in a series of laws in 1965. As a result, annual Federal outlays for education soared from \$1.1 billion in 1964 to the \$19 billion spent by the Department of Education in 1984.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Project Head Start, enacted in 1965, extended Mr. Johnson's "War on Poverty" into education and changed the way that people perceived schooling and its potential effect on lives. The goal was to overcome disadvantages that stood in the way of education, and through education overcome poverty.

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was the foundation stone on which Mr. Johnson and his successors erected and enlarged a Federal program of aid to the schools on a scale previously unimagined. Title I, which provides funds to compensate for learning disabilities, alone poured \$4.4 billion into the schools in the first two decades of its existence.

The program now provides more than \$3 billion a year to serve 4.7 million students across the country.

Companion legislation, the Higher Education Act of 1965, set up a system of financial aid for college students that completed the circle, giving more high school graduates the opportunity of pursuing a degree and the hope of overcoming indigence. Twenty years ago, the Federal Government's Office of Education was providing \$267 million annually in aid to college students; the amount last year was \$13 billion.

As the student aid programs have expanded over the last two decades, enrollments in colleges and universities have risen from 5.28 million students to 12.35 million. Access to higher education has been widened enormously for groups that were formerly on the outside looking in. The number of black college students, for instance, grew from 234,000 to about 1.1 million in the period, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Attempts to Cut Education Budget

Mr. Reagan has proposed substantial reductions in Federal aid to education year after year, only to have Congress rebuff him.

Mr. Reagan began his Presidency by trying to cut \$654 million from the education budget in the remaining months of the 1981 fiscal year. Instead, Congress increased appropriations to the Education Department from \$14.1 billion to \$14.3 billion. The initial interplay between Mr. Reagan and Congress set a pattern. The President has regularly sought to pare Federal funds for education and each time the lawmakers have increased funds over what they were the previous year.

The Administration did win a partial victory at the outset by eliminating many programs, like aid for metric education and ethnic heritage education, that had crept into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act over the years. The law was recast as the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, giving the states more control over allocating the Federal funds for various purposes, except for Title I, the remedial education program, which became Chapter I of the new act.

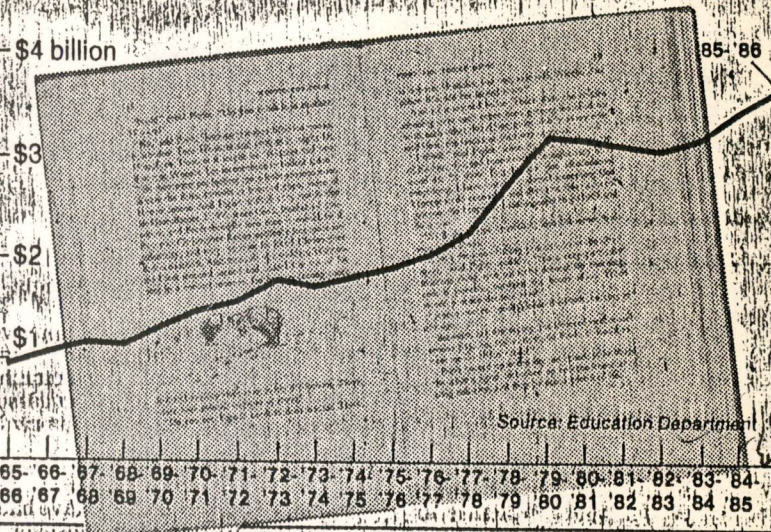
Yearly Increases Curbed

Though Mr. Reagan has been unable to win the deep cutbacks he wanted in the education budget, he has provided enough pressure to hold down the rate of the annual increases. Thus, the Federal portion of the total revenue of local school districts fell from a high of 9.2 percent in 1979-80 to 6.2 percent in 1984-85.

Federal intervention, however, has influenced the schools far beyond the monetary value of the programs.

A Supplement for Learning

Appropriations each school year for Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provides money for remedial education. The Federal Government distributes the money to states, which then parcel funds to local school districts based on a poverty formula.



Source: Education Department

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At the elementary and secondary level, the Great Society programs spurred state governments to become more involved in education. A portion of the Federal funds was designated to strengthen state education agencies, and many states started their own programs to supplement the Federal contributions.

The idea that early educational aid can offset learning disabilities and other disadvantages, particularly poverty, owes its widespread acceptance today to Head Start, a preschool program for children 3 and 4 years old, and Title I. Until these initiatives, with but few exceptions, little thought was given to intervening at an early age to prevent students from falling behind at a later age.

Changes in the Classroom

Many features taken for granted in today's classrooms are legacies of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the practices it encouraged. Teaching strategies developed in these programs, including attention to individual students and small-group instruction, have influenced all of education, as have techniques to evaluate children that were built into the Federal ventures. Even the development of specialists, like reading teachers, stems from these programs, which encouraged such expertise.

Furthermore, recognition of the importance of education in the early years has led school systems that had no kindergartens to create them and is now the impetus for offering formal education to 4-year-olds, as has been proposed in New York.

Desegregation, too, was eventually promoted by funds from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was amended in 1972 to add a section for this purpose. Also, the act became the wedge that cleared the way for Congress to aid bilingual education and education of the handicapped.

Ultimately, the Federal influence in education grew large enough to be the basis of a Cabinet-level Department of Education, created by President Carter in 1980 to replace the old Office of Education.

Gaining Support for Aid

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act consisted of five parts, four of which went for aid to libraries, innovative projects, research and the operation of state education agencies. But it was Title I, which directed money to parochial schools as well as public schools and allowed the states to oversee Federal involvement, that broke a logjam of opposition to win support for the legislation.

Along with Project Head Start, Title I represented a natural extension of the Federal "War on Poverty" programs into education. An indication of the optimism that accompanied the effort was Mr. Johnson's prediction that as a result of Head Start, children would be able to spend their lives "productively and rewardingly, rather than wasted in tax-supported institutions or in welfare-supported lethargy."

Title I, like Head Start, was aimed primarily at poor children. Funds were allocated to the states based on a formula linked to the number of families below the poverty line.

The effect was sizable. New York City, for instance, has gotten more than \$3 billion in assistance through the program in the last 20 years. This year alone the Board of Education will get almost \$214 million in assistance for salaries and supplies for 5,880 teachers and aides, who will provide remedial education to 173,000 of the system's 930,000 students.

Only schools that qualify under the poverty formula get funds through the program, but once the money reaches the school it may be spent on the lowest achievers, regardless of family income. Thus, the National Institute of Education estimates that about half the program's funds over the years have been spent on children who are not from poor families.

Confusion Over Effects

The money may be spent at any grade level, but at least two-thirds of the expenditures are concentrated in elementary schools, especially on instruction in reading and mathematics, because educators concluded that programs to compensate for educational disadvantages had the greatest effect at an early age.

More is known about how the program's money has been used than about the effect it has had. Despite the size of the expenditures, Washington has never determined what long-term differences the aid has made in education.

"The program was at first oversold and many of the goals were unrealistic," said Iris C. Rotberg, who was deputy director of the National Institute of Education's Compensatory

Education Study in the 1970's and is now on the staff of the National Science Foundation. "The program was expected to substantially reduce poverty and to reduce the restraints on social access, but Title I could not by itself solve the basic problems of race and poverty."

Many of the millions of students who have been in federally funded programs have still been unable to catch up to normal achievement levels. Yet many authorities maintain the situation would be worse were it not for the Federal programs.

Gap in Achievement

Students entering the program at a near-average achievement level profited most from the program, whereas students entering at a low level of achievement seemed to profit little, if at all," Lauror F. Carter, who directed a study of the impact of Title I, wrote last year in Educational Researcher, the journal of the American Educational Research Association.

Another study found that low-achieving fourth graders around the country improved markedly from 1971 to 1980.

"Many things that happened in the '70s could have dramatically affected student achievement in reading," said Roy Forbes, former head of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federally sponsored program for monitoring student achievement. "But the movement that stands out above all others during the '70s is the effort to better educate the economically disadvantaged. Title I and all the associated national and state efforts probably played a central role in the improvement of reading skills among those students who historically performed less well."

The effect of Head Start, like that of Title I, has not been established irrefutably. A few highly publicized studies that followed a handful of children through high school strengthened arguments in behalf of the long-term effect of Head Start, which is as concerned with nutrition, medical care and parental assistance as it is with providing a base for learning.

But new questions have been raised by a federally sponsored study made public in August, which found that while Head Start has had a powerful immediate impact on children, the benefits fade so quickly that their performance a few years later is almost indistinguishable from that of youngsters who were not in the program.

Even so, the program, which has served 9 million children, overwhelmingly from impoverished backgrounds, is so well accepted that a month after taking office Mr. Reagan said, "There will be no cut in Project Head Start."

Attempts to Cut College Aid

Mr. Reagan has been far less favorably disposed toward the higher-education initiatives stemming from the Great Society. His attempts to reduce aid for college students account for most of the cutbacks he has proposed in the education budget.

He has been largely unsuccessful in getting such reductions approved, though, because student aid has come to be regarded not only as a right of students, but also as important to the survival of many colleges.

An original aim of student aid was to assure that the least affluent students would be able to afford college. Though college enrollments have climbed, it is unclear whether student aid has been responsible, since in the last 20 years there has also been a huge expansion of low-cost community colleges and a new emphasis on getting degrees.

"The research on college participation and the factors that influence it are pretty confusing," said Lawrence E. Gladieux, the executive director of the Washington office of the College Board, an association of schools and colleges. "There is no clear-cut, hard research that demonstrates that these programs have in fact increased college participation rates of the original target groups — the disadvantaged, low-income and minorities."

"I look at the sweep of the past 25 years not only in terms of the direct Federal subsidies, but in terms of the entire movement to broaden educational opportunity," Mr. Gladieux added. "It has been a society-wide effort and there is no doubt that higher education has been democratized."