

# Comment

By Iris Rotberg

## A Title I Researcher Talks About Reexamining Federal Education Programs

The following are excerpts from remarks by Iris Rotberg at the United States-Israel Colloquium on Education of the Disadvantaged in Washington, D.C., Dec. 9, 1980.

Rotberg is director of the Office of Planning and Program Development of the National Institute of Education. She was deputy director of a recent NIE study of Title I.

The change in administrations, as well as federal budget constraints, make this a particularly appropriate time to discuss federal education policy for elementary and secondary education.

During the next few years, there is likely to be a reexamination of the assumptions and structure of federal aid to education. This reexamination will come at a time when there is optimism, on the one hand, about the effectiveness of some of the programs, and growing concern, on the other, about the regulatory, fiscal and coordination problems they create for state and local governments.

This article considers accomplishments and problems.

Generally, experience during the past 15 years suggests that federal education programs can be effectively designed and implemented and that they can make a significant contribution. More important, there is greater realism about what programs can and cannot accomplish. A considerable amount is known about effective program designs, about problems and limitations, and about possible improvements.

Our expectations and assessments of federal financial aid have changed substantially since the programs began in 1965.

These programs at first were oversold. Many expected—perhaps hoped is a fairer word—that the programs would substantially reduce poverty and remove the constraints on political and social access by dramatically raising children's achievement and subsequent success in higher education and employment.

Not unexpectedly, the early evaluations produced negative findings—in part because, at the time the research was conducted, the programs were not yet fully operational, and in part because the measures of effectiveness were based upon unrealistic standards for the success of the program.

Current expectations are more realistic.

Federal programs cannot change a child's overall educational experience. They cannot, by themselves,

solve educational problems whose fundamental causes are rooted in basic social and economic disparities within the country.

They can, however, if well designed, provide educational experiences which can produce measurable educational achievement gains.

### Program Effectiveness

Federal education programs are too diverse to permit a general statement about their effectiveness.

Some programs are too small, or the control over funds is too weak, to make a significant improvement in the educational services children receive.

Evaluations of certain programs—for example, Bilingual Education and Vocational Education—are inconclusive primarily because the characteristics of the services provided are so unclear that even the most careful study cannot tell whether the target groups are better off and, if so, whether the program is the reason.

Further, federal funds account for only a small proportion of total expenditures in these areas and are not clearly used to provide supplemental services.

However, other programs like Title I ESEA, the largest elementary and secondary program, have been thoroughly and carefully studied and have produced clear—and positive—results.

The NIE evaluation of Title I indicated that the program has been highly successful in meeting the purposes intended by Congress.

Title I directs substantial federal aid to areas with the highest proportion of low-income children. Care is taken to assure that the funds are used to provide special additional services to low-achieving children in the poorest schools.

Not unexpectedly, under these conditions, the program enhances the educational achievement of participating students.

Thus, the NIE study found that first grade students made percentile gains of 12 to 15 points in reading and mathematics between fall and spring testing. Third grade students made percentile gains of between 7 and 15 points during the same time period. Both of these gains were higher than would be expected without the special instruction provided by the program.

While we cannot conclude from the results that all compensatory education students are gaining as much as those who participated in the study, the results indicate that school districts can and do create the con-

ditions necessary to make compensatory instructional services effective.

The NIE results are consistent with findings of other studies. For example, Arthur Wise noted in a recent RAND study that the National assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown increases in reading scores for precisely those groups who have been the primary recipients of federal education programs—the poor, the young and the Black.

### Design And Implementation Issues

The design of Title I—in particular, the fact that it has realistic goals and is clearly targeted to specific schools and students—has a lot to do with its success.

The federal government can meet its funds allocation objectives effectively without inappropriate interference in how subject matter is taught. It can direct resources to specific school districts and schools. It can fund supplemental services for specific population groups.

Given the difficulties faced by some federal programs, getting funds to the right places and the right people is no small accomplishment.

In addition to meeting funding objectives, it is important that programs contain provisions to ensure that funds supplement and do not substitute for state and local expenditures.

Local school districts faced with recurrent fiscal problems are under considerable pressure to use federal funds to replace state or local resources. Without provisions requiring supplementation, there is little reason to believe that the federal funds would add to total spending for education.

Similarly, provisions are needed to ensure that federal programs in fact provide extra services and that the target children receive them.

These outcomes are not obvious results of statements of federal intent. The require specific provisions and careful management.

The point is made by the local officials themselves. In interviews conducted by NIE to determine whether districts would direct funds and services to the target population if there were no restrictions in the form of funds allocation requirements, two comments reflected a general consensus among the administrators interviewed:

"Historically," said one state Title I director, "the educationally deprived in poor areas do not have the political clout to require the provision of equal resources, and certainly not extra resources. Title I ensures

that these children will not be ignored. Most LEAs in my state, if left to their own devices, would not use federal funds for compensatory education in poor areas; they would be used to counter the current fiscal crisis, whatever the crisis might be."

A local district Title I director put it this way: "Without strong language in the Title I regulations [about intended beneficiaries and the supplementary nature of the program], there is no question that Title I dollars would be used essentially as general aid. I don't think the superintendent could avoid that."

Although federal programs can ensure that the intended beneficiaries receive supplemental educational services, it is not at all clear that the programs should attempt to intervene in local decisions about instructional techniques or planning methods.

I suggest that the failure to make a distinction between identifying target groups and ensuring supplemental services; on the one hand, and interfering with local planning or instructional methods, on the other, has resulted in cumbersome and time-consuming regulations that at best have limited positive effects on program quality and may in fact detract from more appropriate and reasonable federal objectives.

It is the federal involvement in local planning or instructional methods which has overshadowed the fundamental gains which have been achieved by certain carefully designed programs.

It has also weakened the basic political support of even high quality programs.

### Problems Of Federal Programs

The most significant problems of federal programs stem from the lack of coordination among multiple programs.

The combination of requirements from different programs—both federal and state—often places trying administrative and financial burdens on school districts. These problems are summarized from a briefing given by Paul Hill describing research he conducted at RAND.

The problem basically results from a lack of coordination and clarity in the present system. Students, teachers and principals must cope with the combined effects of programs that legislators and higher level administrators deal with separately and in a rather distant setting.

The result is that the point of supplementary instruction—to give stu-

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## Bill Would Encourage Elementary School Guidance Counseling

Proposed legislation to give schools a federal incentive for elementary-level guidance and counseling programs was introduced in the U.S. Congress last week by Rep. Carl Perkins, D-Ky.

The existing federal guidance and counseling program, part of Title IV of ESEA, has withered on the vine in recent years, getting no appropriation at all in fiscal 1981 and no request for funding from President Carter for fiscal 1982.

Nothing daunted, the American Personnel and Guidance Association and its member American School Counselor Association, with Perkins, are back with a new proposal to authorize \$125 million in 1983 "to assure the accessibility of developmental guidance and counseling to all children of elementary school age."

Money would be allocated to states, on a population basis with 50/50 matching of federal and state funds.

At the local level, the money would be used to "employ one or more new and/or additional elementary school guidance counselor per school district."

Justifying the request for a new federal program, Perkins' bill notes that "The elementary school today is no longer protected and isolated from



Left to right: Cynthia Terres, president, American School Counselors Assn.; Patricia Harden, elementary counselor, Fayette County, Ky., schools; Rep. Carl Perkins, D-Ky.; Hazel Dunning, ASCA elementary vice president; Thomas Sweeney, president, American Personnel and Guidance Assn.; Clemmie Solomon, chairperson, APGA Government Relations Committee; and Charles Lewis, APGA executive vice president.

society's problems."

"Elementary school children, are, therefore, increasingly vulnerable to these external pressures as they attempt to acquire personal and social, in addition to academic, skills," the bill says.

Early symptoms of those pressures

are underachievement, lack of interest in school, classroom disruption and truancy. Without early and appropriate intervention, the bill warns, the problems are manifested as juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, vandalism; and "the loss to society of fully functioning and capable adults."

For information about APGA's elementary guidance and counseling legislative activities, contact Patricia Hooper, Coordinator of Guidance Services, Orange County Department of Education, 1230 South Grand Ave., P.O. Box 11846, Santa Ana CA 92711.

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dent extra help in specific areas without replacing the basic educational curriculum—is often lost when students are assigned to several special programs rather than to one or two which best meet their needs.

In addition, school districts must respond to a large number of new federal and state regulatory requirements that must be financed from local revenues rather than from categorical federal or state funds.

Since 1975, the federal government has published several major new sets of requirements in areas such as education for the handicapped, teacher training, students' rights to privacy and due process, sex equity, and education for the gifted. One of these requirements—the Education for All Handicapped Children Act—provides federal subsidies for only about 12 percent of the services it requires school districts to deliver. Requirements of the other Acts are totally without federal financial support.

Further, most state governments have added their own regulations. In California, school districts can be required to implement as many as 33 state categorical programs.

The combination of regulations which are not supported by funds for their implementation and decreased local fiscal capacity has created severe financial difficulties for school districts.

Not unexpectedly, districts have responded by reducing the level of the basic instructional programs and by using grant funds intended for one purpose or beneficiary group to provide services for another beneficiary group.

The temptation of course is to go one step further and to seek funding which is without any restriction and which may be used, in effect—particularly during periods of fiscal difficulties—completely outside the field of education.

### Alternatives For The Future

Ideally, any changes in the current system would build on the positive outcomes of existing programs.

What we need is more clarity and simplicity in the current system, while ensuring that federal funds are used to provide supplemental services for target populations.

There are a wide variety of alternative proposals which are being discussed by government and professional communities.

Although several of these proposals may have some merit, there is insufficient information about their implications to advocate one over another.

### Options

It may be useful, however, to note a few examples of options which should be examined.

The simplest and probably most realistic suggestions propose incremental changes in the current system to make programs more efficient.

For example, the RAND studies suggest that we recognize the perma-

nence of multiple programs and improve their management.

Under this proposal, both local and federal action is needed.

Local districts can limit the number of programs offered in each school, and give the responsibility for program coordination to district officials, who have more time to spend on administrative matters, rather than to principals and teachers.

Federal officials can help by not adding new programs, by recognizing the problems resulting from requirements which do not provide funding, and by helping multi-program schools integrate their federal programs.

Another suggestion for simplifying program management is to exempt from certain federal regulations those states with high expenditures for disadvantaged children.

Finally, there are a set of proposals for various types of federal program consolidation aimed at reducing administrative burdens.

These include, for example, consolidation of categorical programs with similar purposes into a single broad category serving the same target population; and making block grants to states without regulations as to how the funds should be used.

Depending on how the programs are designed, it may be feasible to implement the first proposal for consolidation and continue to provide supplemental services for needy students.

However, the second proposal—the proposal for block grants—would threaten the considerable progress that has been achieved in designing

effective federal education programs.

Programs without funding control typically provide general purpose government support rather than increasing overall educational expenditures or providing extra services for the children who need them the most.

If federal subsidies are needed to relieve the financial problems of states, that issue should be argued on its merits.

We should not assume, however, that under such circumstances the funds are likely to increase the quality of education or to go to population groups that need them the most.

In short, experience during the past 15 years indicates that federal programs can make an important contribution to educational achievement. The federal government can provide funds to needy areas of the country and to specific population groups.

There are some unintended outcomes and a problem of multiple programs: the most significant problems stem from lack of clarity and coordination and from requirements without financial support.

There is a need to make the current system more efficient without changing the basic objectives of providing supplemental services to the neediest students.

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Views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the U.S. Department of Education.