

## **A FAILING GRADE FOR EDUCATION COMMISSION**

The National Science Foundation's Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology has just released its report--with spending recommendations guaranteed to bust the federal budget and expand the deficit. Spending for education nation wide already absorbs a greater percentage of the gross national product than defense, and U.S. spending per pupil exceeds that of other industrial nations whose students outstrip American youngsters in virtually every academic category. Nonetheless, the Commission's answer to the problems of U.S. education is even more federal money. It urges an additional \$4.6 billion in federal support for education.

Of particular concern are the recommendations for model schools in math and science and for retraining elementary and secondary school teachers. Between 1977 and 1982, the federal government spent \$108 million to establish specialized "magnet schools" designed to increase school integration and improve school quality. This program was relatively successful, mainly because spending money was but one element of a careful strategy. The start-up rate for these schools was slow enough to allow time to rally solid community support, and the outlays were fiscally prudent--the maximum number of schools created during any year was 69, at a cost of \$30 million in federal funds. The success of these magnet schools was due in large part to nonfinancial factors--community involvement, commitment, and pride.

Strangely, the National Science Foundation's Commission wants the federal government to abolish the very factors that helped to assure the success of these magnet schools. The Commission proposes establishment of 2,000 magnet schools over a five-year period (400 schools a year--nearly six times the maximum in the earlier program) and has called upon the federal government, whose involvement in education has elicited sharp criticism recently, to finance 65 percent of the planning and start-up costs.

Such massive federal intrusion threatens the entire magnet school approach. It would undermine the critical and delicate school/private sector partnership. The forging of creative and appropriately targeted partnerships, such as those between business and schools, is already taking place in many states and localities. But these partnerships lose their purpose and enthusiasm when the federal government tries to take over the function they were meant to serve. Successful magnet schools,

too, have to be crafted at the local level and tailored to local circumstances. They cannot be produced on a federal assembly line. Most important, bitter experience teaches that excessive federal involvement leads to burdensome, inappropriate regulations and federal control--precisely the kind of constraint that stifles local creativity.

The unfortunate recommendations on magnet schools are matched by the Commission's proposal to retrain 85 percent of the 1.17 million elementary school teachers, and the 200,000 secondary math and science teachers in summer and in-service institutes, at a whopping cost to the federal treasury of \$3,000 per teacher. This would require unprecedented federal action: retraining 1,164,500 teachers in an allotted 5 years would require a program six times the size of any previously attempted in this country. Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, the National Science Foundation did oversee a model program in the form of institutes for the training of secondary school teachers. Institutes modeled on the program established by NSF may be appropriate for secondary teachers of math and science who must teach advanced subject matter, but they are hardly appropriate for retraining elementary school teachers, who require very different skills. The latter group can be retrained by college instructors and outstanding high school math and science teachers at one-third the cost of an NSF institute. Moreover, special technology is now being developed to fill this retraining function. Once this is in place, the cost to the taxpayer will be reduced even further.

Given the intense debate over the proper role of the federal government and given the data that document a decline in academic outcome inversely to the rise in federal input, these NSF Commission recommendations are ill-conceived--even foolhardy. Like so many proponents of increased federal action to "solve" the education crisis, the Commission assumes that more money from Washington will meet the country's needs. They overlook the fact that successful initiatives spring from local groups and that many education deficiencies can be met with far more economical approaches.

The revitalization of education will not come from a centralized educational bureaucracy that uniformly imposes its will from above. Improvement will occur only when the states and localities take the initiative by designing programs that reestablish basic standards in the nation's schools and merit pay for teachers--and when school districts move effective control of the public schools out of the hands of the teacher's unions and into those of parents.

Eileen Marie Gardner  
Policy Analyst

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For further information:

Eileen Marie Gardner, "Closing the Math and Science Gap," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #265, May 1983.

"Blue Ribbon Panel Confirms Decline in Standards," Education Update Vol, 7, No. 1, July 1983.

Robert J. Samuelson, "From Crisis to Crisis," National Journal, July 9, 1983.

Joseph Adelson, "How the Schools Were Ruined," Commentary, July 1983.