Let's Abolish the Department of Education

August 17, 1995 by Phyllis Schlafly

Abolishing the Department of Education was one of Ronald Reagan's campaign promises when he ran for President in 1980. Fulfilling that promise is long overdue, and the time to do it is now.

Education is not a department that has always been with us like State, Treasury, and Justice. The Department of Education was created as a payoff to the National Education Association (NEA) for its early endorsement of Jimmy Carter's presidential candidacy in 1976.

That NEA endorsement was a significant factor in giving Carter national visibility and momentum. At that time, the little-known one-term Governor of a southern state was considered a long shot by most observers.

The NEA has the same symbiotic relationship with Bill Clinton. On his way to the 1992 Democratic National Convention that nominated him, he stopped off for a visit with Keith Geiger, then NEA president, and promised to invite him to sleep in Abe Lincoln's bed at the White House.

Contrary to the gloom-and-doom fearmongering of the education lobby, U.S. public schools will not collapse if the Department of Education is abolished. Public schools flourished before there was any Department of Education (and academic standards were much higher), and public schools will continue to exist if the Department is abolished.

Federal spending in public schools amounts to only about six percent of their total budget. Every week we read about corporations successfully downsizing their workforce and thereby achieving greater efficiency, so public schools should have no difficulty downsizing by six percent. Their top-heavy and redundant administrative bureaucracy is a scandal, anyway.

Congress doles out 70 billion federal tax dollars per year on what is euphemistically called education. The mere listing of the programs is awesome and depressing.

The Department of Education spends $33 billion a year of this amount administering 244 different programs. The remainder of the $70 billion is spent by 30 other federal agencies on 308 programs, which the General Accounting Office says "often are duplicative and overlapping."

More than 90 federal preschool and child care programs are administered through eleven federal agencies and 20 offices that target children of similar ages and provide similar services. There are 86 federal programs in nine federal departments that offer teacher training.

At least 46 federal programs administered by eight federal agencies are working on what is called youth development. Fourteen different programs provide food and food-related assistance. At least 163 federal programs, spread out among 15 departments and agencies, say they are providing employment and training assistance.

This federal spending imposes a costly paperwork burden on local schools. A 1991 survey of Ohio school districts reported that schools must complete 173 federal reports and forms.

We should face the fact that, like welfare, our 30 year experiment in federal spending on education has failed. Illiteracy has reached epidemic levels and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have dropped 73 points since 1960.

Incidentally, the decline in SAT scores is now going to be concealed from the public starting this year by the simple device of raising every test score nearly 100 points. They call this "centering," but another word for it is cheating.

The 1994 election sent a strong message to Congress: cut federal spending, reduce government, eliminate agencies. Unfortunately, some Congressmen seem to think they can pretend to abolish the Department of Education while merely shifting the functions and the spending to other agencies.

It is a bafflement how any Congressman could think that the constituency eager to abolish the Department of Education could be appeased by transferring the functions and the spending to Labor Secretary Robert Reich or Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala. Yet those are the most discussed proposals for education "reform."

Out across America, the mood of the people is just the opposite. Three states this year actually rejected federal funding for Goals 2000, a truly remarkable reaction to the offer of goodies from the federal treasury.

The U.S. Constitution doesn't mention education, and there is no authority in the Constitution for the Federal Government to meddle in local schools. Education is not a proper federal function.

If the Federal Government has no constitutional authority to ban guns from schools (which the Supreme Court ruled in this year's Lopez decision), then it follows a fortiori that the Federal Government has no authority to impose curricular requirements or hand out funds according to the whims and the politics of federal officials.

Public schools in America were vastly superior before the Federal Government turned on the funding faucet. It's time to write finis to federal aid to education and return that $70 billion per year to the American people in tax cuts.