P.S. to the NEWS
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POLICY CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Ronald Reagan's promise to abolish the Department of Education appears to be high on his list of priorities for the new Administration. Pending the attainment of that worthy goal, the new Secretary would be well advised to implement the recommendations made by the Heritage Foundation in its "Mandate for Leadership Project."

This was an ambitious undertaking which has resulted in constructive, specific proposals for every department of government. Heritage is a Washington-based, conservative-oriented "think-tank" expected to be influential in the Reagan Administration.

The basic thrust of the section on the Department of Education is toward more local control and less federal meddling in school administration, policy, and curriculum. Heritage recommends shifting significant departmental responsibilities to state and local levels, along the lines proposed by Rep. John Ashbrook and Sen. Orrin Hatch.

It is to be expected that Heritage would urge cutting the Department in size, personnel and budget, and it does. However, Heritage concludes that it is more important to change policy and personnel than organizational and financial structure, and very important to base education policy on cooperation rather than coercion.

Title III of the present Higher Education Act should be rewritten at once to divest the Department of Education of its administrative enforcement authority over college and university curriculum and operating programs. The same changes can be brought about at the elementary and secondary levels by administrative decisions.

According to the Heritage study, only three types of federal participation in the field of education are desirable: information gathering and dissemination (such as publicizing information on standardized tests), consultation and technical assistance in dealing with on-site teaching problems, and educational research and development. Those were the traditional federal duties in the field of education, until the Carter Administration subordinated education to social policy goals, such as forced busing, "values clarification," and training in ethical relativism.

(more)

The Office of Civil Rights within the present Department of Education has become the vocational haven of advocates of social goals through coercion and harassment (e.g., by demanding outrageously detailed and expensive data from schools). It is destructive of good federal-state relations, and even more destructive of quality education.

Here are some specific policy recommendations made in the extensive Heritage Foundation study. The spending of tax moneys to serve only special interests, such as the Teacher Centers and Women's Education Equity, should be eliminated because there is no evidence that they promote quality education.

The study urges the rescission of the proposed regulation that would require school districts to teach non-English speaking students in their native language as well as in English, a controversial issue better left to local authorities. The study recommends the voucher system as better than direct federal grants as a means of coping with the special problems of disadvantaged, "gifted and talented," and Hispanic students.

The one dubious Heritage recommendation is that federal attention be given to improving the quality of basic skills (reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic). The need to improve basic skills is certainly desperate, since the (presumably college-educated) Heritage staff that produced this report apparently does not know the difference between "principal" and'"principle" or between "effected" and "affected."

There is no evidence that the federal government can teach basics. U.S. students' ability to read, write, spell, add and subtract has deteriorated in inverse correlation to the spending of federal billions.

The most constructive Heritage education proposals are in the area of civil rights enforcement. (1) Implement the Supreme Court Bakke decision by stopping the imposition of quotas. (2) Explore ways to make the Supreme Court case of Pierce v. Society of Sisters, which establishes the right of parents to send their children to private schools, a real right for lower-income parents through tuition tax credits.

(3) End federal discrimination against religiously-affiliated institutions. The granting of federal funds should not be used as an inducement to require schools to abandon all their religious character. (4) Enforce the Hatch Amendment which requires parental consent for all programs that teach "values," and stop funding all programs which foster hostility to traditional values. (end)