

THE BIG FEDERAL MOVE INTO EDUCATION

"I WILL never do anything in my entire life that excites me more, or benefits the nation I serve more, or makes the land and all of its people better and wiser and stronger, or anything that I think means more to freedom and justice in the world than what we have done with this education bill."

So said Lyndon Johnson in his rambling pastoral prose, and many U.S. educators agree with him about the historic importance of the new law that is formally titled the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. "It is a tremendous breakthrough," says Atlanta School Superintendent John Letson. "As significant as the passing of social security legislation," says Lindley Stiles, dean of the University of Wisconsin's School of Education. New York State Education Commissioner James E. Allen Jr. forecasts a "tremendous impact" for the bill; to him, it symbolizes the fact that the knowledge explosion has put an end to the mythology of the self-made, self-educated man as well as the self-sufficient local school.

The bill authorizes the spending of \$1.3 billion—a relatively small sum considering the fact that public education in the U.S. is an annual \$34 billion business. The real breakthrough lies in the fact that the Federal Government has overcome a longstanding taboo and become a full-scale partner in grade-school education, both public and private. Thomas Braden, chairman of California's State Board of Education, sums it up this way: "With the rapid moving of families in our nation, the interlocking economy, the sense of a national community, it is archaic to think that education is not a national task."

Historic Shift

Not since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which set aside new lands for public schools, has the national government been formally committed to broad support of education at the precollege level. Explained the Ordinance: "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Yet the U.S. Constitution, drafted the same year, said nothing at all about education, reserving that function to the states—which assumed the task so conscientiously that, even without federal direction, the uniquely American drive toward universal education soon became a key strength of the nation. In fact, education became almost synonymous with democracy.

As the cost of education increased, the Federal Government was repeatedly urged to act, but it did so only in response to specific crises and with relatively narrow, mostly vocational aims. Thus the Morrill Act of 1862, which helped set up 68 land-grant colleges to promote agriculture and "mechanic arts," was partly a Civil War tactic. Each war inspired similar federal action, from support of vocational training in high schools during World War I to aid for school districts with heavy concentrations of defense workers and the famed G.I. Bill of Rights of World War II. The Soviet Sputnik in 1957 scared Congress into enacting the National Defense Education Act, which supports science, math and language instruction in public schools and provides loans to college students. Defense and space needs sent federal research grants pouring into colleges—and chased many a good teacher out of his classroom and into his lab. Total federal aid to education now runs to about \$5 billion a year.

Yet this aid has had little impact on the bulk of the nation's 26,000 public-school districts. Bills for general aid to education have been pending in all but twelve of the last 96 sessions of Congress, dating back to 1867. Their backers have generally argued that the wide differences between and within states in expenditures on education frustrate equal opportunity. Example: Mississippi spends \$273 per pupil, New York \$790; within Connecticut, Darien spends \$697,

Montville \$298. Real estate is often overtaxed for local school support, and states risk driving away industry if they raise local taxes; federal aid should ease these problems. Yet all previous general-aid bills died because they became mired in three issues: aid to church-supported schools, aid to racially segregated schools, the fear of federal control.

Lyndon Johnson succeeded because he avoided the mistakes of his predecessors and produced an ingenious bill that neatly defused the explosive issues. It is a bill that combines local autonomy with a great deal of federal initiative and leaves remarkable latitude for the play of creative ideas.

The Poor & Operation Bootstrap

TITLE I, which draws most of the attention and most of the money (\$1.06 billion), is designed to aid local school-district projects which help "educationally deprived children." The money will flow to state education officials, who will decide what specific projects originated by local public-school districts qualify. The U.S. Office of Education can veto a project, but its decision could be appealed in the courts. Each district can request a maximum amount equal to half of what the state spends to educate each child, multiplied by the number of children of all families in its district, with incomes under \$2,000. This will mean, for example, a 25% increase in Mississippi's public-school funds, a 4% hike for New York. No district can use the money to lower the level of its local support of education.

The funds may not be used for such general purposes as raising teachers' salaries or building classrooms, but otherwise the only limitation is the extent of local imagination. A Senate report lists 50 possibilities, ranging from hiring additional teachers in order to reduce the size of classes, to providing clothing and shoes for the needy, to assigning social workers to work with parents of the poor. Georgia expects to finance kindergartens, which have proved invaluable in easing the transition from a bad home environment; only half of U.S. public-school districts now maintain them. Cleveland plans to extend its school day past 3:30 p.m. to permit an array of remedial reading and arithmetic classes, individual tutoring, personal and vocational counseling. Atlanta hopes to set up workshops for the teachers who will teach the poor, since most are from middle-class backgrounds and may be out of touch with such children.

Public schools holding special classes for children with special environmental problems will be required to accept similar students from private schools on a "shared-time" basis—already a longstanding practice in some communities, where parochial-school students attend certain classes in public schools. Since Title I is pegged to state levels of school support, it is expected to have a bootstrap effect as states realize that each dollar they add to their own support will bring more federal funds. Beginning in 1966, districts that increase their own spending by at least 105% per pupil can apply for a matching amount from Washington for each pupil; this program is expected to cost some \$400 million next year.

Libraries & Far-Out Projects

TITLE II provides an even \$100 million to buy textbooks and expand school libraries, including the purchase of books, periodicals, phonograph records. The money will go directly to state agencies, will be handled entirely by the states, but distribution of the materials must be made equitably to private- as well as public-school students "to the extent consistent with" state law. To avoid legal complications, ownership of the materials will be retained by the public agency. The program is not tied to the poor; funds will be split among the states according to their percentage of all the nation's elementary- and secondary-school pupils.

This money will be eagerly snapped up: only about one-

third of U.S. lower schools now have libraries. Boston's 55,000 public-elementary-school pupils have no library at all, nor do some 100 elementary schools in Philadelphia. Says U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel: "A school without a library is a crippled school."

TITLE III has brought most enthusiasm from educators, since it involves no strings at all, aims at uplifting educational services to all students in public or private schools, in any way a local district sees fit. The first-year authorization of \$100 million is certain to set off a keen competition for approval of local projects. Under this section of the bill, local districts will deal directly with Washington: Commissioner Keppel's office will select the projects it considers most worthy. Of the available funds, \$200,000 must be set aside for each state, and the rest, roughly \$90 million, will be split among the states in two ways: half on the basis of their school-age population, half on the basis of their total population.

The purposely vague wording of the title calls for "supplementary centers and services," and the bill carries only three broad hints as to what these would do: provide new communitywide services to schoolchildren, raise the quality of such existing services, and set up model programs. Under Keppel's theory that "education is too important to be left solely to the educators," the program accents community participation.

The most obvious possible services are bookmobiles and portable science laboratories to reach isolated students, special classes for the gifted or the handicapped. Yet it will probably take more than the obvious to meet the competition, and such an imaginative project as New York's Harkness Center, operated by 18 school districts near Buffalo seems a likely candidate. The center develops courses, trains teachers, keeps a library of 2,400 films, has a computer that does payrolls and report cards for all the member schools. St. Paul hopes to qualify with its "Operation Fresh Start," which tries to lure high school dropouts back for vocational training.

Rockland Community College in New York plans a cultural center with library, museum, planetarium and closed-circuit educational television for the benefit of neighboring towns. Cleveland's Superintendent Paul W. Briggs has plans for a center offering "almost limitless innovation, looking like no school building ever constructed before—where most talented elementary-school violinists might work in small groups with top players of the Cleveland Orchestra, where top industrial researchers could work in labs with talented children."

Fading Fears

TITLE IV provides \$100 million for research contracts that Keppel can sign with any "university, college or other appropriate public or nonprofit private agency." Reason behind this provision: of the \$34 billion now spent on public education, less than one-fifth of 1% is going into basic research to find new techniques and new teaching concepts.

TITLE V is designed to cope with the danger that in many cases the new bill might fall short for lack of direction at the state level. Many of the state departments of education are woefully understaffed, underpaid and incompetent. Since the workload will increase sharply under the bill, \$25 million will go to states to strengthen such state agencies.

The act seeks to evoke, rather than force, improvement in local districts and the states. This responsibility should stimulate rather than stifle them. There will be fiscal safeguards against flagrant mishandling of money, but the only hint that Washington's hand could become heavy lies in a requirement that Title I projects be reviewed annually to see whether the money is having a beneficial effect. This could lead to some type of national testing so that progress can be evaluated, a specter that always frightens school superintendents. Yet one eventual result of the act may well be some form of national minimum educational standards.

Federal spending on education will obviously keep growing, and the influence of Keppel's office, which is already being expanded, will be considerable. But to a surprising

degree, the old fear of federal control has faded. Schoolmen have been working with federal money for years, and though they may object to some of the paper work, they have discovered that so far Washington has never tried to tell them what or how to teach. "I believe in local control," says New York's Commissioner Allen. "But local control also means that you allow a community to be as poor as it wants to be—and we can't afford that any longer." California's Braden contends that "this concern over federal control is a bugaboo. We already have federal aid amounting to 4% of our school budget in California, and there's been no such attempt at control."

The bill avoided any racial flare-up because the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had already decreed that no federal funds can aid any project operated on a discriminatory basis. But the law will put heavy pressure on the nation's public-school districts to file assurances that they do comply with the Civil Rights Act. Commissioner Keppel has firmly insisted that Southern school districts must either present specific plans to drop their dual school systems within four years or openly agree to permit Negro students to enter any school of their choice, except where a school is seriously overcrowded. So far, he has accepted the plans of only twelve (out of some 2,000) Southern districts, has actually withheld the distribution of some \$200 million in federal aid under previous programs. He is also turning a critical eye on many Northern school districts that seem gerrymandered to create virtually all-Negro or all-white schools. There has been a general decline in the agitation by civil rights groups to bus large numbers of pupils out of their neighborhoods.

In all, however, some 12,000 districts still have not filed desegregation statements that have satisfied Keppel's office. Governor Carl Sanders of Georgia recently telephoned Keppel to protest: "My boys went extra lengths to change their systems. If any Negro wants to go to a white school, they are pledged to let him in. My God, what more do you want? Do you want us to advertise to drum up business?" Keppel's one-word answer: "Yes."

Ignorance or Taxes

Religious controversy was avoided partly because the bill offers only indirect aid to parochial schools and because much of this aid benefits poor children—a feature difficult to attack. But parochial schools were also included in the wide-open Title III, which particularly pleases Catholic educators since it constitutes a sharp thrust toward broadly based general aid. To a great extent, this was made possible by the ecumenical trend in the U.S. today, which has eased religious tensions. (President Kennedy had hobbled himself with a self-imposed difficulty: his determination to do nothing that might be interpreted as pro-Catholic.)

There still are practical religious problems to be worked out in shared-time programs. Asks Sam Hamerman, a Los Angeles public-school official: "Will the nuns appear in their habits in public-school classes? Will the parochial children be kept together or split up in public-school classes?" Undoubtedly there are many court tests ahead, but Washington is confident that little will come of them.

The U.S. faces a new age of education. On even the simplest levels of life, learning is the key to survival; standing on the edge of space, witnessing the dizzying extension of the human brain by the computer, Americans more than ever require an extension of knowledge and the right kind of learning. The new education bill does not by itself provide this. It does not contain an ideology of education and would have neither shocked nor necessarily cheered educators from Horace Mann to John Dewey. It does not and cannot answer the question of what shape U.S. education should take in the wake of its long era of permissiveness and mass-production methods; but it does greatly stimulate the search for answers. In short, if it does not guarantee excellence, it promises improvement. And it begins to fulfill the goal set forth in the 1830s by Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, who said: "We must teach our citizens to dread ignorance more than they dread taxation."