
Education, Social Reform, and the State: ESEA and Federal Education Policy in the 1960s

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This essay examines the history of federal education policy in the 1960s. Focusing on the ideological context and the political and institutional framework that shaped the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, it argues that federal education policy in the 1960s was informed by widely shared assumptions about the nature of poverty and about the relationship of the state to the economy. These assumptions made educational reform central to Great Society policies designed to eliminate poverty and equalize economic opportunity. Yet because the Great Society was reluctant to challenge existing institutional arrangements and was constrained by the makeup of the Democratic party coalition and the federal government's capacity to control local educational practices, it was unable to make the education of disadvantaged students a top priority of local school districts, even though it successfully institutionalized the federal commitment to improving education for economically disadvantaged children.

Prior to 1960, the federal government played a relatively minor role in the development of educational policy. Though proponents of federal involvement had fought for more than 20 years to expand the federal interest in elementary and secondary education, they had been thwarted repeatedly by opponents who, for a variety of reasons, were fearful of federal involvement in education. As a result, at the end of the 1950s the federal role in American education remained marginal. Indeed, except for payments to a few hundred school districts to compensate for the financial impact of nearby federal installations, the distribution of small amounts of money to states to further vocational education, and some financial support for teacher training and curriculum development in science, math, and foreign languages under the recently enacted National Defense Education Act, the control of

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educational policy remained largely with state and local governments (on federal education policy before 1960, see Munger and Fenno 1962; Tiedt 1966; Thomas 1975).

Mainly because of pressure to expand educational opportunity for those neglected by the educational system, this began to change after 1960. As part of the New Frontier and Great Society social agenda, between 1960 and 1970 the federal government launched an extraordinary number of new initiatives that increased federal aid to elementary and secondary schools from about a half a billion dollars to \$3.5 billion and expanded the number of federal education programs more than sixfold, from 20 to 130, many designed to equalize educational opportunity for poor and educationally disadvantaged students. By 1976, federal expenditures on elementary and secondary education had increased to \$4 billion, over half for programs to promote equal educational opportunity (Timpone 1978, p. 2; Graham 1984, p. xix).

This expansion of federal involvement in education was one of the most striking developments in the history of education in the 1960s. What most distinguished the new federal role (and what eventually made federal involvement so controversial), however, was not chiefly the large number of new programs or the scope of the federal financial commitment, which never amounted to more than 10 percent of total public school finances despite the rapid increase in federal expenditures. More important was the purpose of the new federal programs and the regulatory efforts to ensure they were fulfilled. Whereas earlier federal efforts had focused on issues (such as preparation for the workplace or the improvement of teacher training in science, math, and foreign languages) that did not threaten local interests and required minimal federal regulation, the new federal commitment to equalize opportunity was much less widely embraced by local leaders and extended federal involvement much more directly into aspects of educational decision making once considered the exclusive domain of local educators (Bailey and Mosher 1968, p. xi; Levin 1982, p. 445; Kaestle and Smith 1982, p. 401).

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Nothing symbolized this new federal commitment more than the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Described by one scholar as the “keystone of the Great Society’s expansion of federal education activity,” ESEA not only broke through the long-standing opposition to federal aid to education (Thomas 1983, p. 274), it also focused attention on the educational needs of poor children and established federal standards to push school districts toward more equitable treatment of disadvantaged students. The result was to give the federal government a distinct new role in defining the nation’s educational priorities and to make federal policy a central focus of the struggles over access to schooling and control of educational policy that characterized the history of education during the 1960s and early 1970s (Edelman 1973, p. 341; Timpane 1978, p. 1; Bailey and Mosher 1968, pp. 3–4; McLaughlin 1975, pp. 1–12).¹

From the perspective of 1990 when skepticism about the possibilities of liberal reform has become widespread and when several critical evaluations have moderated the initial optimism about ESEA’s potential impact on school achievement for poor and minority children,² it is difficult to grasp how significant an accomplishment ESEA represented, especially to those federal officials and social scientists responsible for designing the legislation and pushing it through Congress. Yet in 1965, as Samuel Halperin has reminded us, the president, Congress, and educational policymakers all hailed the bill as “a social breakthrough of the first magnitude” that promised not only to revolutionize the federal role in education but to equalize educational opportunity for disadvantaged children and eliminate poverty as well (Halperin 1970, p. 30,916). As U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel explained to the House Subcommittee on Education in 1965, “The new program dramatically parts company with education proposals and policies of the past. . . . It provides aid to students in elementary and secondary schools to a larger degree than ever before proposed. It gives special and long needed attention to the education of the children of the poor who need the best our schools can give and who usually have received the worst, [and] . . . it commits education to end the paralysis that poverty breeds, a paralysis that is chronic and contagious and runs on from generation to generation” (quoted in Meranto 1967, p. 36).

What accounted for this breakthrough in educational policy? Who demanded it? Why did it take the form it did? In exploring these questions, most explanations of ESEA, and the Great Society’s educational programs in general, point to the conjunction of postwar social changes—particularly the migration of southern blacks to northern cities and its impact on urban school systems—with changes in national politics. But when they seek to explain the relationship of

these changes to the development of specific federal policies in education they generally tell three distinct stories.³

The first views federal domestic policy—including educational policy—as the chief instrument for redressing the inequalities of American life. Linking the New Frontier and the Great Society to the reformist stream in American life, it argues that President Johnson's commitment to education coupled with the Democratic landslide in the 1964 congressional elections made possible the culmination of liberal efforts originating in the 1930s and 1940s to overcome conservative opposition to federal aid to education. One version of this story judges the results to have been beneficial, helping to extend “broad, just, humane, and rational perspectives” to the development of educational policy (Bailey and Mosher 1968, p. xi; for this view, also see Sundquist 1968). Another version judges the results to have been detrimental, leading to the dilution of the curriculum and the erosion of the ideal of academic excellence (e.g., see Ravitch 1983). But in both versions, the expansion of federal involvement in education resulted from the work of liberal reformers eager to equalize educational opportunity for those long denied the promise of American education.

The second explanation for the expansion of federal educational policy stresses the behavior of interest groups and the formation of a new group of policy intellectuals. In this view, the development and passage of ESEA resulted from bargaining between the major professional associations and educational interest groups—particularly the National Education Association and the National Catholic Welfare Conference—that resolved long-standing differences over the provision of federal aid to parochial schools and disagreements about the relative merits of categorical vs. general aid to education. They were joined in this process by intellectual and educational policy elites—including John Gardner, Sidney Marland, Ralph Tyler, and others serving on the 1964 Legislative Task Force on Education—who helped design the legislation and by government officials—especially U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel and his assistants in the Office of Education—who served as mediators through which disagreements could be resolved. Though some of these interpretations evaluate the outcome of this process positively and others negatively, they all agree that the result was a more expansive conception of the federal role in defining and making educational policy and an enhanced bureaucratic capacity for further expansion and development of the federal role in education (Meranto 1967; Eidenberg and Morey 1969; Jeffrey 1978; Thomas 1975; Graham 1984).⁴

The third view also focuses on the role of government officials, educational policymakers, and social reformers. But it questions the notion that federal involvement in education during the 1960s was due to a desire to achieve equality or to the role of social scientists and policy intellectuals. It suggests instead that federal involvement was part of an elite-sponsored effort that began after World War II to subordinate schools to the needs of national economic and foreign policy interests. According to this argument, elites concerned about economic efficiency and social disorder looked to education to train future workers and ameliorate the social conflict caused by racial discrimination and poverty. The result, in this account, was a host of new social programs that shaped schools in the interest of political and corporate elites at the expense of teaching students to protect and defend their individual political and economic rights (Spring 1976; Butchart 1979).

None of these stories are wrong. The history of ESEA and federal educational policy in the Great Society is incomplete without any one of them. But each overlooks how ideas about the role of the state and federal action informed debates about educational policy and takes for granted how patterns of politics and state institutions shaped the development and implementation of the Great Society's educational programs. Consequently, even though their perspectives differ, they tend to obscure the ideological and political dynamics underlying the expansion of federal educational policy in the 1960s.⁵

This essay addresses these issues. Focusing on the ideological context and the political and institutional framework that shaped the history of ESEA, it argues that the expansion of federal education policy in the 1960s was based on widely held assumptions about the nature of poverty and about the role of the state and its relation to the economy. These assumptions made educational reform central to Great Society policies designed to eliminate poverty and equalize economic opportunity. At the same time, however, because of their conceptions of school reform and because of the way the opportunities for federal action were constrained by the nature of the Democratic party coalition and the administrative capacity of the federal education bureaucracy, Great Society policymakers were reluctant to mandate major changes in local educational practices. As a result, even though ESEA and other Great Society educational programs successfully institutionalized the federal commitment to improving education for the poor, they were, by and large, unable to make the education of disadvantaged students a top priority of local school districts. Indeed, the essay suggests that the history of ESEA and federal education policy in the 1960s is

not primarily a story about unwarranted federal intervention in local educational matters, as many educational policy analysts now contend, but, rather, a story of the possibilities and limits of liberal reform in the American state.

I

The day after John Kennedy's assassination, Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, met with Lyndon Johnson to inform him of plans under consideration for an attack on poverty. For Johnson, who was eager to show the Kennedy people in the administration that there would be continuity in policy at the same time that he wanted to establish his own identity and constituency, the idea of an attack on poverty was politically appealing, and he told Heller "to push ahead full-tilt" on the project (quoted in Brauer 1982, p. 113; on education and the origins of the war on poverty, also see Sundquist 1969). Just a few months later, in his first State of the Union address, Johnson made the war on poverty the centerpiece of his 1964 legislative program, stating that his administration "here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America" (Johnson 1965*a*, p. 114). Out of this initial commitment grew the vision of the Great Society, "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community" (Johnson 1965*a*, p. 704).

From the outset, the idea that education was one of the most efficacious ways to eliminate poverty occupied a central place in the thinking of those in the Johnson administration responsible for planning poverty policy. Citing surveys that pointed to the correlation between low educational attainment and poverty, Heller advised Johnson in January 1964 that "education is at the core of any successful sustained campaign against poverty" (quoted in Patterson 1981, p. 186), a point he and others on the staff of the Council of Economic Advisers initially responsible for planning the war on poverty reiterated shortly thereafter in their 1964 annual report to the President. "Equality of opportunity," the report stated, "is the American dream, and universal education our noblest pledge to realize it. But, for children of the poor education is a handicap race. . . . And many communities lengthen the handicap by providing the worst schooling for those who need it most" (*Economic Report of the President 1964*, p. 56).

Johnson himself often included this argument about the connection between education and poverty in his speeches on the war on poverty and the Great Society. In his first presidential policy paper on education

issued in November 1964, he stated, “Our war on poverty can be won *only* if those who are poverty’s prisoners can break the chains of ignorance. We must give our best the chance to do their best” (Johnson 1965*b*, p. 1563).⁶ He repeated this point on several occasions, most notably in his 1965 budget message to Congress, when he argued that the improvement of education deserved “first priority” among the nation’s unfinished tasks. “It is our primary weapon in the war on poverty,” he stated, “and our principal tool for building a Great Society” (Johnson 1966, p. 94).

This faith in education as a solution to the problems of poverty was not, of course, unique to policy planners in the Great Society or to Lyndon Johnson, though he often referred to education as his own “passport out of poverty” (Johnson 1965*b*, p. 1428).⁷ Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, educators, government officials, and policymakers have argued that education, as Horace Mann put it in 1848, “prevents being poor.” But the prominence of education in the thinking of antipoverty planners reflected more than the continuation of traditionally accepted ways to solve social and economic problems or the president’s view of the role of education in his own success. As influential as these concerns may have been, more fundamental was the way dominant ideas about the nature of poverty, most notably, the idea of a “culture of poverty,” shaped perceptions of the poor and how conceptions of the state and its relation to the economy influenced the way liberal policymakers thought about government action.

Several writers have pointed to the way the concept of a culture of poverty shaped thinking about poverty policy. First introduced by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in his ethnographic studies of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, this thesis made two points about the poor (Lewis 1961, 1966*a*, 1966*b*, 1969). One was that poverty was characterized not just by a lack of income but by a distinct set of attitudes, behaviors, and personality traits, ranging from “present-mindedness” and an inability to “defer gratification” to feelings of “marginality, of helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority.” The second point was that these attitudes and behaviors were passed on from poor parents to their children, depriving them of the psychological resources they needed to escape the fate of their parents. As Lewis put it, the culture of poverty tended “to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are six or seven they have absorbed the values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur” (Lewis 1969, pp. 191, 199; on the culture of poverty, also see Patterson 1981, chap. 7).

Some social scientists stressed that the culture of poverty was an adaptation to the structural conditions the poor encountered in their daily lives. Herbert Gans argued, for example, that the poor were “an economically and politically deprived population whose behavior, values, and pathologies—are adaptations to their existential situations” (Gans 1969, p. 205). This point was echoed by others, including Lee Rainwater, who argued that it was misleading to discuss lower class culture in isolation from the social, economic, and ecological setting that produced it. Indeed, Rainwater contended that an analysis of the culture of poverty must take into account those characteristics of conventional society that militated against change in lower class culture, especially “the almost total unwillingness of conventional society to admit its complicity in the suffering and exclusion that lower-class people experience” (Rainwater 1969, pp. 247, 251).

Lewis also recognized that the culture of poverty was an adaptation to the marginal social and economic conditions of the poor. The culture of poverty, he wrote, serves to “cope with the feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the impossibility of achieving success in terms of the values of the goals of the larger society.” But Lewis argued that the culture of poverty persisted not only because of the structure of the larger society and that it could not be eliminated only by improving economic conditions. Because of what happens to the aspirations and worldview of children in poverty, he maintained, economic change alone would not eliminate the culture of poverty. Only a movement that organized and gave hope to the poor and that promoted “solidarity and a sense of identity with larger groups” would destroy “the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty” (Lewis 1969, p. 191).

Lewis’s notion that the surest way to eliminate poverty was through mobilization of the poor anticipated the role of community action in the war on poverty. But his argument that organization and group consciousness would break the cycle of poverty was drowned out by his emphasis on poverty as a culture. Ignoring his thesis about the adaptive function of the culture of poverty, most observers tended to view poverty as a persistent behavioral pattern rooted in the personality of the poor themselves and passed on from one generation to the next.⁸ Summing up the popular wisdom, the *Saturday Evening Post* editorialized in September 1964, that the roots of poverty “lie in the self-perpetuating ‘culture of poverty’—of ignorance, apathy, resignation, defeat and despair—by which one generation of the poor infects the next, until, among thousands of families now on relief rolls across the country, poverty has been perpetuated into the third and fourth generations” (quoted in Patterson 1981, p. 120). Or, as the 1964 Report

of the Council of Economic Advisers succinctly put it, “Poverty breeds poverty” (*Economic Report* 1964, p. 69).

This view of poverty had three implications for the way planners thought about poverty policy, all of which pointed to the need for more and better education. First, though it acknowledged the structural sources of deprivation, the culture of poverty thesis tended to focus attention more on the personal characteristics of the poor themselves than on the economic and social conditions that shaped their lives (Aaron 1978, p. 20). Consequently, and this is the second point, because it implied that people were poor due to their own attitudes, behaviors, and life-styles, it suggested that changing the poor rather than redistributing income or creating jobs was the best way to eliminate the problem of poverty. As the 1964 Report of the Council of Economic Advisers explained, it would be far better to “equip and to permit the poor of the Nation to produce and to earn” the income needed for a decent life than to give them cash since this would “leave untouched most of the roots of poverty” (*Economic Report* 1964, p. 77).

Finally, the culture-of-poverty thesis suggested that since poverty was not just an economic condition but a psychological one passed on from parents to children, the poor lacked the will and capacity to attack the sources of their own deprivation. It implied, instead, that the elimination of poverty required professional intervention so the poor might acquire the skills and attitudes they needed to break the cycle of deprivation and despair that characterized their lives. Indeed, by defining the poor as dependent, the culture of poverty was one vehicle by which liberal social scientists in the 1960s enhanced their own role in making public policy.⁹

What this argument overlooked was the magnitude of the changes necessary to alter the behavior of the poor and whether behavioral changes would be sufficient to reduce poverty (Aaron 1978). Even many of those who emphasized that the culture of poverty was a response to economic and social conditions advocated measures designed to make the poor more productive citizens. But by connecting an analysis of the economic and social sources of deprivation with the psychology and daily behavior of the poor, the culture-of-poverty thesis defined a set of barriers that seemed amenable to reform without viewing the poor as inherently incompetent. As Michael Katz (1989, p. 23) has observed, in emphasizing the environmental influences on behavior and highlighting the adaptive coping strategies of the poor, it preserved some dignity for the poor at the same time that it criticized the culture that resulted from living in poverty and pointed to the importance of government-sponsored intervention to compensate for its disadvantages. By providing the poor with skills, the government

could reduce poverty without blaming the poor themselves or initiating potentially more disruptive struggles over the organization of the American economy, or so it seemed at the time (Aaron 1978, pp. 20–21; Mead 1986, pp. 55–56).

II

By focusing attention on the characteristics of the poor, the culture-of-poverty thesis directed attention to the need for more and better education. Reinterpreted as cultural deprivation it provided a rationale for the expansion of federally sponsored educational programs to help the poor acquire the skills and attitudes they needed to break out of poverty. What ultimately made federal involvement in education so central to the war on poverty, however, was not just the belief that the poor needed special assistance to escape their helpless condition. Equally if not more important was the way conceptions of the state and its relation to the economy had shaped thinking among liberals inside and outside the government about the possibilities and limits of federal action since World War II.

As Alan Brinkley has pointed out, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, two sets of ideas emerged among liberals in the policy community about the role of the state and its relation to the market. One was an enhanced belief in what Brinkley calls “a regulatory state.” Based on a distrust of large capitalist institutions stemming from their experience during the Depression, advocates of this view embraced a “vision of capable, committed administrators who would seize command of state institutions, invigorate them, expand their powers when necessary, and make them permanent forces in the workings of the marketplace.” The second concept of the state also sought to enhance the power of the government. But in contrast to the notion of a regulatory state, advocates of this view argued that the government should make greater use of its capacity to tax and spend as a way to promote economic growth and solve social problems. In this view, what Brinkley calls “a vision of an essentially compensatory government,” the state could manage the economy and mitigate the social outcomes of the market without directly intervening in the operation of the marketplace. It could, in Brinkley’s words, “compensate for capitalism’s inevitable flaws and omissions without interfering with its internal workings” (Brinkley 1989, pp. 92, 112; on this point, also see Weir 1988; Wolfe 1981, chap. 2).

Partly because it spurred an economic revival and restored the political prestige and power of big business and partly because it diminished

faith in the government's capacity to manage the economy, World War II resolved this debate in favor of the idea of a compensatory state. Faced with escalating opposition from businessmen and from conservatives in Congress and having discovered during the war that capitalism was not inevitably doomed, liberal policymakers and government officials increasingly rejected the idea of a regulatory state that intervened to manage the affairs of the market. They argued instead, as Brinkley points out, that economic expansion and social progress could proceed indirectly by using the government's fiscal powers to stimulate economic growth (Brinkley 1989, pp. 105–12; Wolfe 1981, pp. 16–17; Amenta and Skocpol 1988).

This emerging view of the role of the state and its relation to the market was institutionalized with the passage of the Employment Act of 1946. As initially designed in 1945, this bill sought to guarantee full employment through state action by making the government the lender and investor of last resort. When finally approved, however, the bill retreated from the promise of full employment through government intervention in the market. Originally called the Full Employment Act, the final bill dropped the term full employment, subordinated the government's responsibility for full employment to the maintenance of production and purchasing power, and limited government action to policies consistent with private control of the economy. As the final version of the bill stated, it was the policy of the United States to “promote maximum employment, production, and purchasing power” through all practical means compatible with “free competitive enterprise” (quoted in Lekachman 1975, p. 170; on the debate over the Employment Act of 1946 and its historical significance, see Collins 1981, pp. 104–7; McQuaid 1982, pp. 124–28; Wolfe 1981, pp. 52–53; Weir 1988, pp. 155–56).

The triumph of fiscal policy after World War II did not eliminate debate among liberals about how the government should manage the economy. In the 1950s and early 1960s, several liberal policymakers and government officials—including John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur Goldberg, and Willard Wirtz—argued that the federal government should spur growth and reduce unemployment by increasing spending, while others—most notably, Walter Heller and his colleagues on the Council of Economic Advisers—argued that it should stimulate growth and expand employment through tax cuts. This debate was hardly trivial. As Galbraith pointed out in *The Affluent Society* (1958), stimulating the economy through tax cuts impoverished the public sector whereas stimulating the economy through spending allowed government officials to connect economic policy with collective public goals. But even those who, like Galbraith, argued that fiscal stimulation should be achieved

through spending and those who, like Wirtz, pushed for supplemental public employment did not seriously challenge the concept of the compensatory state that had emerged in the years since World War II (Brown and Erie 1981, pp. 312–13; Chafe 1986, pp. 185–86; Weir 1988, pp. 168–71; Aaron 1978, pp. 28–29).

This consensus on the role of the state and its relation to the economy had several consequences for the way planners in the Johnson administration eventually approached poverty policy and the role they assigned to education in their antipoverty strategy. Most important, since it ruled out direct intervention in the labor market or in corporate investment policies in favor of public policies designed to promote growth through the manipulation of aggregate demand, it directed thinking about poverty away from changing the organization of the economy and intervening in the prerogatives of private corporations toward altering the characteristics of the poor themselves and reforming the behavior of public institutions. As a result, when policymakers and government officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations began to formulate poverty policy in the early 1960s, they turned chiefly to organizations such as public schools or to other state-sponsored programs and to measures such as job training and compensatory education designed not to change the operation of the labor market but to help those on the bottom of society acquire the skills and attitudes they needed to compete more successfully in it (Weir 1988, pp. 177–79; Katznelson 1989, pp. 199–205; Skocpol 1988; Przeworski 1985, p. 40).

Nowhere was this approach to poverty policy and its implications for the role of education in the war on poverty more evident than in the 1964 Report of the Council of Economic Advisers, which outlined the main features of the administration's antipoverty program. Though it was informed by the culture-of-poverty thesis, the report summarized the problem of poverty in largely structural terms. It attributed poverty to racial discrimination, regional unemployment, low wages, and inadequate transfer payments, and it recognized that, while rising productivity had reduced the number of Americans living below the poverty line, "in the future economic growth alone will provide relatively fewer escapes from poverty." Yet despite its structural diagnosis, the report outlined a compensatory strategy to address the problems of the poor. Although it argued for government action to eliminate racial discrimination in the labor market, it overlooked income redistribution, public employment, or more direct interventions in the labor market and proposed instead a program based mainly on tax cuts and the provision of new educational services to stimulate growth and equip the poor with the tools they needed "to *earn* the American standard of living

by their own efforts and contributions" (*Economic Report* 1964, p. 77). In the war on poverty, as Henry Aaron has observed, structural change came to mean additions to human capital through education and training, not government intervention to change the demand for low-wage labor, the composition of the labor market, or the distribution of income (Aaron 1978, pp. 116–17; on this point, also see Haveman 1977, pp. 6–8; 1987, pp. 14–18; Lampman 1965; Katz 1986, pp. 255–58; Patterson 1981, p. 136).

Because of opposition from business and middle-class voters, it is unlikely more interventionist strategies could have commanded sufficient support to win approval from Congress. By contrast, the antipoverty strategy outlined by the Council of Economic Advisers promised to do something for the poor without either antagonizing business by interfering in the labor market or alienating the middle class by redistributing income to the least advantaged (Wolfe 1981, pp. 95–96; Chafe 1986, pp. 185–92; Hodgson 1978, pp. 76–86).¹⁰ But pressure from business and the middle class was not the only reason policymakers adopted this strategy. As Margaret Weir (1988) has pointed out, the decision to reject more direct government action was also taken because those responsible for planning the war on poverty were convinced that poverty could be eliminated most efficiently by indirect macroeconomic policies such as tax cuts supplemented by education and training to boost the poor into the labor market and out of poverty.

Indeed, in formulating plans for the war on poverty, officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations considered proposals to attack poverty by increasing expenditures for public employment but rejected them. As Adam Yarmolinsky later recalled, planners debated whether to concentrate on "finding jobs for people or preparing people for jobs." But since they knew the former strategy was more expensive and believed that cutting taxes would create jobs "our tactical decision was let's concentrate first on preparing people for jobs" (Yarmolinsky 1969, p. 39; also see Katz 1989, pp. 92–93; Jeffrey 1978, p. 37). What Yarmolinsky failed to add, however, was that job creation was too expensive precisely because policymakers were committed to aggregate economic policies and believed that tax cuts would achieve their objectives most effectively while poverty policy would equalize opportunity through relatively inexpensive public programs such as compensatory education and job training.

Despite this emphasis on education as a solution to the problems of the poor, aid to elementary and secondary schools was not included in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the legislation that initiated the war on poverty. Though an early draft of the bill had included a provision for special grants to supplement state and local funds for

public education in poor neighborhoods, planners eventually eliminated it from the legislation sent to Congress. Concerned that school bills had traditionally run into trouble in Congress and that inclusion of aid for public education might jeopardize the entire measure, they substituted instead an emphasis on vocational and prevocational programs designed to train the poor to get and hold better jobs. This emphasis, they believed, was less likely to get embroiled in the politics of race and religion that had doomed education legislation in the past (Yarmolinsky 1969, p. 36; Jeffrey 1978, p. 28).

But the notion that education would eliminate poverty hardly disappeared. Because the vision of a regulatory state had been rejected in favor of a less intrusive set of public policies, education remained central to antipoverty policy. Indeed, the belief that education was the key to winning the war on poverty became the chief rationale for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

III

Like many reforms, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act had several objectives. Not least was establishing the principle of federal aid to education. Mindful of the political difficulties that had undermined previous efforts to secure federal aid, one of the chief tasks facing those responsible for designing the legislation was to come up with a politically viable bill that avoided the church-state, desegregation, and distribution-formula controversies that had rung the death knell for educational legislation in the past. As several participants as well as later scholars have observed, “getting the law on the books” was one of the prime objectives of policymakers, including Lyndon Johnson, and was taken by some “as a valid end in itself” (Halperin 1970, p. 30,916).¹¹

One of the first issues that planners had to resolve was how to distribute federal funds to local school districts. Most policymakers agreed that federal aid should be based on an equalization formula whereby federal funds would be distributed in a compensatory fashion to less wealthy states. But prior to 1965 no politically acceptable formula had been found to accomplish this since representatives of wealthy states generally opposed legislation that returned less to their constituents than they contributed in taxes, while representatives of poorer states rejected proposals that did not grant their states proportionately more than their federal tax contribution. By linking education to the elimination of poverty, however, planners were able to devise an allocation

formula (based on the number of low-income children multiplied by one-half the state's average per pupil expenditure) that made it possible to dampen this conflict by providing funds to almost every congressional district in the country while guaranteeing that the needs of poor children in big cities and rural areas were also addressed.¹²

Critics in recent years have charged that this allocation formula purchased political support for ESEA at considerable cost to program effectiveness. They contend that, since funding has never been adequate, distributing aid to every district dispersed resources so widely that poverty areas did not receive sufficient funds to make a difference in the education of poor children. They propose, instead, that funds be concentrated on schools in the nation's most impoverished neighborhoods, where recent research suggests that all children are less likely to succeed in school and poor children are especially likely to suffer from educational deprivation. But the idea of giving a little federal aid to nearly every district, though educationally questionable, made ESEA politically viable, resolving the problem of finding a method of distributing funds that had blocked passage of legislation in the past and sustaining Congressional support for the program in the 1970s and 1980s when the political climate became considerably more skeptical about the benefits of federal education programs (Peterson et al. 1988; Smith 1988).¹³

Equally if not more troubling to those responsible for drafting ESEA was how to resolve divisions over the church-state issue. At the heart of the matter was how to reconcile the interests of the National Education Association and other public school lobbies, which wanted aid for public schools only, with the interests of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which opposed legislation that did not contain financial support for parochial schools. As recently as 1961, this conflict had been responsible for the defeat of the Kennedy administration's school bill that provided aid only for public schools, and many doubted that a compromise could be found. Indeed, following the defeat of Kennedy's school bill, one observer commented that the "religious and philosophical antagonisms engendered by school questions are so bitter that a solution through normal . . . methods is no longer possible" (quoted in Sundquist 1968, p. 205).¹⁴

Despite this pessimistic prognosis, Commissioner of Education Keppel and officials in the Johnson administration eventually worked out an agreement for a bill that won approval from both Catholics and public school officials. They proposed a plan that allowed parochial school pupils to participate in federally funded programs administered by the public schools and that provided textbooks, instructional materials,

and equipment to private schools through loans, not grants. This satisfied Catholics who got a substantial, though not an equal, share of federal aid and also satisfied the National Education Association which agreed to some indirect assistance to parochial schools as the price that had to be paid to win Catholic support for federal aid to the schools, which the NEA had long wanted (Munger and Fenno 1962, pp. 58–61; Meranto 1967, pp. 56–58, 69–70, 82–84; Eidenberg and Morey 1969, pp. 66–68; Bailey and Mosher 1968, pp. 15–17; Guthrie 1968, p. 305; McAndrews 1989).

What made the resolution of these issues so politically important was the way differences over race, desegregation, and the extension of central state power affected the Democratic party after World War II. As Ira Katznelson has pointed out, though the New Deal benefited blacks, Roosevelt and northern Democrats did not directly challenge segregation in the South, and their legislative program received considerable support from the southern wing of the party. After World War II, however, civil rights could no longer be dealt with exclusively as a regional matter since the migration of southern blacks to the North and their integration into urban political machines made them an important part of the Democratic coalition. But in developing a national agenda to meet the needs of African-Americans after the war, the Democrats ran into opposition from southerners in the party who viewed any proposal to expand the role of the state as a potential threat to white supremacy and consistently joined with conservative Republicans in Congress to form a blocking coalition that opposed any legislation proposing the expansion of federal power (Katznelson 1989, pp. 192–93; Parmet 1970). Consequently, the resolution of the distribution-formula controversy and especially the church-state conflict became paramount since without southern support the Democrats had to ensure nearly unanimous backing from the northern wing of the party with its large Catholic constituency if school legislation was to win congressional approval.

How this split in the Democratic party over race and the extension of federal power influenced educational legislation became readily apparent after 1950 when the NAACP and liberal Democrats began insisting that federal aid should not be given to any schools that practiced segregation.¹⁵ This provision—embodied in the Powell amendment—was regularly added to proposed education legislation throughout the 1950s. But the inclusion of the amendment doomed education legislation since it united conservative Republicans and southern Democrats in opposition to federal aid. In fact, conservative Republicans often sponsored the addition of the Powell amendment to school legislation since

they knew it would alienate southern Democrats whom they then could join to defeat the legislation on the final roll call, thus effectively nullifying the nominal Democratic majority in Congress (Guthrie 1968; Bailey and Mosher 1968, pp. 21–22; Munger and Fenno 1962, pp. 150–52; Meranto 1967, pp. 31–33).

Most observers have argued that the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which included Title VI prohibiting federal aid to schools that practiced discrimination made the race issue less salient to those drafting ESEA. Yet the Civil Rights Act hardly made race irrelevant to the legislation. Though the passage of Title VI helped surmount the legislative obstacles presented by the Powell amendment, southern Democrats (and Republicans as well) continued to believe—not without reason—that the extension of federal power would threaten segregation and therefore opposed ESEA. On the final roll call vote in the House, which historically had been the graveyard for federal school legislation, southern Republicans voted against the legislation 15–2, while southern Democrats opposed the legislation 53–31. By contrast, northern Democrats in the House voted 197–4 in favor of the legislation (Guthrie 1968, p. 303; Munger and Fenno 1967, p. 74; Meranto 1967, pp. 92–94). Because they had resolved the distribution-formula and church-state issues and because of the Democratic landslide in the 1964 elections, which brought 48 newly elected Democratic Congressmen into the House (all of whom voted for the legislation), the Democrats were able to pass ESEA without substantial southern support, but as James Guthrie has pointed out, the final vote suggests that ESEA “tended more to ‘muscle over’ rather than resolve the racial issue” (Guthrie 1968, p. 303; also see Meranto 1967, p. 92).

That ESEA overrode rather than resolved divisions over race became especially clear once the new legislation was implemented. In the South, many school districts disregarded Title VI and used ESEA funds to perpetuate segregated schools. Officials in the Office of Education responded by stiffening the requirements for compliance with Title VI and threatening to cut off funds for those districts that did not comply. But this prompted a prolonged and sometimes acrimonious conflict with southern Democrats in Congress that strained the increasingly fragile North-South coalition in the Democratic party and, together with an excessively bureaucratic procedure for terminating funds, gradually undermined HEW’s willingness to force desegregation by cutting off ESEA funds.¹⁶ Though most observers credit federal action with pushing the South from intransigent defiance to token acceptance of school desegregation, not until 1968, when the Supreme Court unanimously struck down a freedom-of-choice plan in New

Kent County, Virginia, was substantial desegregation achieved (Orfield 1969; Thomas 1975, chap. 4; Bailey and Mosher 1968, pp. 142–57; Jeffrey 1978, pp. 107–14; Matusow 1984, pp. 188–94).

In the North, divisions among Democrats over race were evident, too. One of the most notable conflicts occurred in Chicago in fall 1965, when a local civil rights group, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, asked the Office of Education to terminate ESEA funds to the city because of Title VI violations. After a preliminary investigation, which indicated probable noncompliance with Title VI, Commissioner Keppel indicated that Chicago would not receive the federal funds it expected until the complaints were cleared up. But this threatened Chicago's Democratic machine and jeopardized Democratic support among white ethnics and, under pressure from Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, President Johnson ordered Keppel to reverse the decision and return the funds to Chicago schools (Orfield 1969, chap. 4; Jeffrey 1978, pp. 113–14).¹⁷

As black protest in the North escalated after 1965 and white backlash against Great Society liberalism intensified, these divisions became more and more difficult to contain. When ESEA was being drafted in late 1964, however, it still seemed possible to overcome them and satisfy the needs of nearly all the major Democratic constituencies. By providing some aid to parochial schools and denying it to racially segregated ones, policymakers believed ESEA would satisfy white Catholics in the North as well as blacks and by distributing federal aid to poorer states as well as to wealthy ones might even appeal to rural whites in the South, too. Only after it was implemented in 1965 did the legislation's political limitations become apparent.

IV

The resolution of the political stalemate that had long blocked passage of federal aid to education was one of the chief achievements of ESEA. But to U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, chairman of the 1964 Task Force on Education John Gardner, and others in the Johnson administration responsible for ESEA, securing federal financial assistance for public education was only part of the problem. They also wanted to design a bill that would shake up the nation's educational system and make it more responsive to the needs of children from low-income families. As Keppel and others pointed out at the time, what set ESEA apart from earlier proposals for school aid was not just that it resolved long-standing political obstacles to federal involvement in education and established the principle of federal aid to education.

More important, it committed the federal government, as Lyndon Johnson put it in his special message to the Congress on January 12, 1965, to “a national goal of *Full Educational Opportunity*,” especially for low-income and educationally disadvantaged children (Johnson 1966, p. 25; on the reformist intentions of ESEA and the priority Keppel and Gardner gave to education for disadvantaged children, see Jeffrey 1978, chap. 2; Halperin 1970; Thomas 1975, pp. 28, 35–36; Graham 1984, pp. 55–75; Keppel 1966).

To accomplish this, ESEA proposed several strategies of reform. One was to provide support for the purchase of textbooks and instructional materials to beef up the nation’s school libraries. Another was to authorize the construction of a national network of regional educational laboratories to conduct basic educational research and disseminate the results to school districts. Still another was to give grants to schools and community groups—libraries, museums, universities—for innovative educational projects. But by far the most important strategy, and the one that garnered the lion’s share of the resources and public attention, was to provide financial aid to elementary and secondary schools for compensatory education programs intended to assist poor and educationally disadvantaged children (Title I).

This notion of reform rested partly on the way the culture-of-poverty thesis influenced thinking about the learning difficulties of economically disadvantaged students. Pointing to the negative effects of the culture of poverty on low-income families, educational researchers argued that poor children were culturally deprived because they grew up in families that offered little intellectual stimulation. According to this argument, children from disadvantaged homes had little exposure to books, magazines, toys, games, and other objects of stimulation and lacked opportunities for verbal interaction that developed the skills necessary for success in school. Consequently, when they began school, they had a difficult time living up to the expectations of their teachers, competing with other children in the classroom, and, ultimately, lost self-esteem, became discouraged or antagonistic toward school, and eventually dropped out. One researcher concluded that “the lower-class child enters the school situation so poorly prepared to produce what the school demands that initial failures are almost inevitable, and the school experiences become negatively rather than positively reinforced” (Deutsch 1963, p. 163; also see Bloom et al. 1964; Reissman 1962, chaps. 1–2).

Some researchers offered a different explanation for the educational failure of poor children. One of those was Kenneth Clark, professor of psychology at City College of New York. Clark did not dispute the negative effects of growing up in a poor neighborhood. He agreed

that poor children, especially poor minority children, experienced feelings of inferiority and hopelessness that sapped their motivation to succeed at school. But Clark rejected the idea that school failure was attributable entirely to the cultural background of poor children. He maintained instead that the school itself—especially the expectations of the teachers—played the “crucial role . . . in determining the level of academic achievement of the children” and argued for “imaginative and comprehensive approaches” to the education of poor children that would “change the attitudes of teachers and school officials from one of rejection and fatalistic negation to one of acceptance and a belief in the educability and human dignity of these children” (Clark 1963, pp. 146, 158, 161; Clark 1965, chap. 6; for a collection of critiques of the culture of poverty thesis, Leacock 1971).

Others agreed with Clark that schools had been insensitive to the needs of poor children. But most looked elsewhere for solutions to overcome the educational disadvantages of children from poor families. If the environment failed to equip poor children with the cultural resources needed for success at school, many reasoned, the school had to compensate poor children for the disadvantages of being born poor by changing their culture. Usually this meant providing experiences—such as trips to museums or libraries or programs to teach verbal skills—that would expose poor children to the cultural advantages researchers and educators assumed they lacked, though some also urged pedagogical changes such as the introduction of “readers and materials attuned to the experiences and problems of lower socioeconomic groups” (Riessman 1962, p. 30; Deutsch 1963; Bloom et al. 1964). In either case, however, nearly all assumed that the educational problems of poor children could be addressed through federally sponsored educational interventions—such as ESEA or Head Start—designed, as Joel Spring (1976, p. 212) has put it, to provide “social compensation for being born into a culture of poverty.”

What made the notion of federal grants for compensatory education attractive to educational policymakers, however, was not just their assumption that government intervention could compensate for the deficiencies of the poor. Equally important were their ideas about institutional change. Although U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, Chairman of the 1964 Presidential Task Force on Education John Gardner, and others in the Johnson administration responsible for formulating ESEA acknowledged that schools were partially responsible for the failure of poor children, they believed that schools failed not because educators had a vested interest in a system that had shortchanged the poor but because schools had become inflexible, unimaginative bureaucracies unresponsive to the needs of their most

disadvantaged clientele.¹⁸ Consequently, they argued that the chief task was to find a way to encourage schools to break out of their rigid routines and thought that this could be accomplished most effectively not by mandating changes in curriculum, instruction, and school administration but through the promise of new grants. As Samuel Halperin commented in 1970, “by earmarking federal funds for the exclusive use of the educationally disadvantaged, it was hoped that all schools would embark upon a new era of concern for the underprivileged” (Halperin 1970, p. 30,917).

Not everyone involved in planning the legislation fully agreed with this approach to reform. One who questioned it was William Cannon, chief of the Budget Bureau’s Division of Education, Manpower, and Services and executive secretary of the president’s 1964 Legislative Task Force on Education. Fresh from his work on the Community Action Program with the Heller antipoverty task force, Cannon viewed local service agencies as obstacles to change and doubted that school districts would reform themselves from within, even with additional federal resources. What was needed, he argued, were new institutions that operated outside the educational system—what he called supplementary educational centers—to provide models for experimentation and innovation and to pressure schools to change their practices (Graham 1984, p. 63; Blumenthal 1969, pp. 146–47; Kearney 1967, pp. 139–55).

Cannon’s proposal for supplementary educational centers was eventually incorporated as Title III of ESEA. But because of opposition from conservatives in Congress and from state education officials, it was watered down considerably. Before the act was passed, Congress undermined the strategy Cannon had envisioned when it insisted that the centers be operated by local school districts instead of by community corporations beyond the control of local educators, and two years later, it further stripped the centers of what Cannon hoped would be their “subversive potential” when it transferred the power to approve the projects from the Office of the Commissioner of Education to the state education agencies, which were considerably more conservative and unlikely to approve projects that challenged local educational practices (on the politics of Title III, see Thomas 1975, pp. 74–87; Eidenberg and Morey 1969, pp. 209–12; Graham 1984, pp. 149–55; Meranto 1967, p. 77).

The other major objection to the strategy proposed in ESEA came from Senator Robert Kennedy. Like Cannon, Kennedy had been influenced by the ideas that had informed the Community Action Program, and he doubted that schools were willing or able to focus on the needs of disadvantaged students. In the Senate subcommittee hearings on

the bill, he said, "I just question whether they [school administrators] have, No. 1, focused attention on where the real problems are and, secondly, whether they have the ability to perform the functions" (quoted in McLaughlin 1975, pp. 3–4; on Kennedy's objections, also see Eidenberg and Morey 1969, pp. 151–52; Graham 1984, pp. 78–79). Kennedy suggested instead that the schools themselves were to blame for the failure of disadvantaged students and wondered if it was wise to pour money into a system that not only "creates this problem or helps to create it" in the first place, as he told U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel at the Senate subcommittee hearings on the legislation, but also did "very little to alleviate it" (quoted in McLaughlin 1975, p. 2).

Kennedy argued that the solution to this problem lay with the inclusion of a reporting mechanism to evaluate what progress had been made under the program, though not because he thought that information alone would reform the schools or because he viewed evaluation as a way to provide information to teachers and administrators. Skeptical about the priorities of educators and their commitment to low-income students, he hoped, rather, that a reporting scheme would provide parents with information about the program's effectiveness so that they could then pressure local school officials to reform their practices and solve the problem of underachievement among the poor. As Halperin explained later, Kennedy thought that low-income parents had the right to know what was happening in the schools and believed that by providing parents with information about the schools' performance evaluation would help redefine the local balance of power and refashion schools along more equitable lines (Halperin 1970, p. 30,917; also see McLaughlin 1975, pp. 3–4; Graham 1984, pp. 78–79).

In response to Kennedy's concerns, the legislative team that drafted ESEA included a provision requiring the states to adopt "effective procedures . . . for evaluating at least annually the effectiveness of the programs in meeting the special educational needs of culturally deprived children." But largely because the evaluation procedures depended, to a considerable degree, on the cooperation of local educators, they seldom served Kennedy's purposes. As soon became clear, most school administrators exhibited little more interest in evaluating their efforts under ESEA than they had in serving poor students (Washington Research Project 1969; Dentler 1969; McLaughlin 1975, 1976; Elmore and McLaughlin 1983). Although Kennedy correctly recognized that changing the schools was not just a matter of will or information but of politics, he failed to ask why local school officials, whom he acknowledged from the beginning were unwilling or unable to shift their

priorities to focus on the poor, would be more willing to document their reluctance or inability to do so, let alone be willing to share that information with the poor or the organizations that represented them (McLaughlin 1975, p. 87).¹⁹

Indeed, in retrospect, the approach to reform that informed ESEA seems somewhat naive. As both Cannon and Kennedy suspected at the time and subsequent evaluations revealed, the notion that dollars for compensatory services would prod state and local officials to alter their practices and improve education for economically disadvantaged students was questionable at best. But the problem was not just that federal policymakers overestimated the power of federal money to stimulate change in local school districts. The strategy that informed ESEA was also shaped by the federal government's limited institutional capacity to influence state and local educational practices and by congressional opposition to almost any federal legislation that would jeopardize local control of the schools.

As Ann Orloff and Theda Skocpol (1984) have pointed out, the history of social policy in the United States has been shaped fundamentally by the lack of administrative capacity of the federal bureaucracy.²⁰ Perhaps nowhere, however, was this more evident than in the way the structure of the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) influenced the approach to reform taken by ESEA. A small, undistinguished agency run by career bureaucrats, the Office of Education had little experience in administering large federal programs. Nor were many of those who staffed the Office of Education eager to assume that role, especially if it meant disturbing their ties with state and local education officials.²¹ To address this problem, federal reformers proposed that USOE be reorganized so that it could take a more active role in the management of education policy. But they continued to worry that the agency would be constrained by a lack of capacity and desire to administer any new federal initiative, and their plans for ESEA took this into account by seeking reform without legislating changes that might overtax USOE's ability to administer new educational programs and monitor local practices. (On the administrative capacity of USOE and its reorganization after 1965, see Bailey and Mosher 1968, chap. 3; Murphy 1971; McLaughlin 1975, pp. 17–19.)

This approach to reform was reinforced by policymakers' fear of opposition from those in Congress who believed that federal legislation would lead to federal intrusion in local educational matters and undermine local control of the schools. As several students of the politics of American education have observed, the ideology of local control of schooling has deep roots in the history of American education, and several members of Congress as well as many professional educators

in states and local school districts worried that federal involvement, especially when accompanied by the kind of strings attached to categorical grants like ESEA, would usurp long-standing local prerogatives in education (Munger and Fenno 1962, pp. 47–52). As a result, the architects of ESEA sought to minimize suspicions that federal involvement meant federal control of education, even as they pushed for an expansion of federal power. As Keppel later explained, though the educational deficiencies of the poor demanded federal legislation, the widespread suspicion of federal control among both lay and professional observers “was enough to demand special measures to assure that federal initiative should not become federal imposition” (Keppel 1966, p. 85).²²

Indeed, what preoccupied Keppel and other federal reformers the most was how to expand the capacity of the federal government to initiate change without directly challenging state and local control of schooling. Convinced that states and local school districts did not share the national interest in expanding opportunity for disadvantaged students, they wanted to shift the balance of power within the federal system so that the federal government had a greater role in defining the nation’s educational priorities. Yet because of their fear of opposition from congressional proponents of local control of schools and their concern about the limited administrative capacity of the central educational bureaucracy, they did not want the national government to run the schools. They hoped instead to use the federal government’s financial resources to identify nationwide educational problems and to help educators solve them while leaving the responsibility for administering the schools at the state and local level (Keppel 1966, chaps. 1, 4, 5; also see Bailey and Mosher 1968, pp. 17–19, 46–47, 60, 75; Sundquist 1969, pp. 218–19; McLaughlin 1975, pp. 18–19; Timpane 1978, pp. 12–14).²³

This preoccupation with finding the right balance between federal power and local responsibility was reflected in the final provisions for the implementation and administration of ESEA. According to the provisions of the legislation, the federal government was to establish basic criteria against which local programs could be evaluated for consistency with congressional intent, but states were to develop procedures for distributing funds and monitoring projects, and localities were given the task of designing and operating local programs. In this way, as Lorraine McDonnell and Milbrey McLaughlin have explained (1982, p. 90), legislative planners hoped to provide enough accountability to establish the legitimacy of federal intent to improve education for the poor without overburdening the administrative capacity of the Office of Education, at the same time that they satisfied those opposed

to federal control by allowing for the play of state and local interests in the development of ESEA Title I projects.

The shortcomings of this strategy soon became clear. As federal officials discovered when they began evaluating the implementation of the legislation, federal funds had not, for the most part, prompted a shift in local priorities. In many cases, they found that local districts did not even spend funds on improving education for low-income students but used them for general educational purposes.²⁴ Their response was to elaborate a variety of guidelines and regulations and to initiate more rigorous enforcement efforts to guarantee that federal aid reached poor children (Bailey and Mosher 1968; Peterson et al. 1988). These efforts led to considerable conflict between federal and local school officials, but together with political pressure from the poor and their advocates, they ultimately produced greater compliance with the legislation's original intent that federal aid should be used to provide additional resources for the education of poor children. Though several ineligible students continued to receive assistance while many eligible students did not take part in the program because of inadequate funding, by 1980 the number of those participating who were neither poor nor educationally deprived had been substantially reduced (Goettal 1978; Kirst and Jung 1980).

Yet fiscal compliance was only part of the problem. Though it guaranteed that compensatory educational services reached poor and educationally disadvantaged students, it did not alter substantially the regular workings of the school. On the contrary, since the easiest way for local officials to comply with the new guidelines prohibiting the use of federal funds for general educational purposes was to set up separate programs for poor children, the new guidelines and the efforts to enforce them also led to the creation of an independent administrative structure that exerted little pressure on the school to change its established practices and to a reliance on pull-out strategies in classrooms that made ESEA marginal to the basic routines of the school. In a real sense, as Carl Kaestle and Marshall Smith (1982, pp. 399–400) have commented, the very characteristics policy planners considered essential for ESEA's success ultimately prevented it from reaching its goals.²⁵

This is not altogether surprising. Since they could not directly control local educational practices, federal officials hoped that targeting funds on the poor would prod local districts to shift their priorities. But the majority of school districts were more concerned with the growth and development of their core institutional functions than with changing their practices to improve education for the disadvantages. Consequently, they had every incentive to participate in ESEA but to modify its purposes to maintain their established programs. And when pressured

by the federal government to make sure that ESEA funds reached disadvantaged students, they had little reason to alter their basic procedures in the interests of disadvantaged children but simply set up peripheral programs instead (on the way local interests diverged from national policy in the Great Society, see Peterson 1980).²⁶

V

The Great Society sought to mobilize the capacities of the state to mitigate the social effects of the market. More than at any time since the New Deal, the state was used to affect the distributional patterns of American society and equalize opportunity for the least advantaged. But the expansion of state activity was undertaken within limits that precluded attempts to reorganize and modify the market itself. Having rejected the notion of a regulatory state, liberals were committed to policies that sought to enhance social welfare through the manipulation of aggregate demand coupled with programs to help the poor acquire the skills they needed to participate more effectively in the marketplace. As Ira Katznelson (1989, pp. 198–99) has observed, the Great Society sought to redefine the boundary between the state and the market but conceded from the very start “the framework of ideas and practices of the larger political economy.”

Education was central to this conception of reform. Convinced that poverty was rooted in the culture of the poor and could be remedied by government intervention to compensate for the effects of growing up in a poor family, Great Society educational policy sought to use the power of the federal government to reorient the priorities of local schools to focus on the needs of low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. The result—institutionalized in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—was not only a dramatic increase in the federal financial commitment to education but an equally dramatic expansion of the role of the federal government into areas of decision making that had long been the almost exclusive domain of local educators.

This represented a major political and ideological change. Not only did it break the political stalemate that had stymied past efforts to secure federal aid to education. More important, it focused national attention and resources on the educational needs of poor children, established better education for the children of poor families as a major national priority, and institutionalized the authority of the federal government to intervene to secure such educational improvement. Measured against the history of opposition to federal aid and the

history of racism and inequality in American education, this was an unprecedented accomplishment (Halperin 1975).

At the same time, it is striking how little ESEA actually asked schools to change their basic routines. Though the act represented a significant break with past policy, it did not mandate reform in school procedures and organization. Nor did it threaten the local school establishment's control of educational decision making. Though it expanded the regulatory role of the federal government, it left responsibility for program design largely in the hands of local educators. And it made only a small attempt to reach outside the schools for new ideas or to empower community groups to pressure schools to change their priorities. Except for subsequent amendments that made provision for the establishment of parent advisory councils (which were only marginally effective) to assure that programs would benefit disadvantaged children, it left the basic structure of control and the administration of schooling intact.

These limitations were rooted partly in policymakers' conception of educational change. Attributing the failure of the schools to serve poor children chiefly to bureaucratic mindlessness not to educators' vested interest in the existing system, most federal reformers believed that schools could be reformed from within by providing financial incentives to local officials to change their practices without mandating changes in pedagogy, procedure, or school organization. Yet even if federal reformers had adopted a more radical stance, it is doubtful they could have succeeded. As the history of the Kennedy amendment on evaluation and Cannon's proposals for supplemental education centers suggest, federal reformers lacked both the support in Congress and local school districts and the institutional infrastructure to make alternative, more radical approaches to reform politically or programmatically viable.

Nor was this approach to reform entirely short-sighted. Because ESEA worked through the existing school system, it eventually won the backing of many school officials, particularly those in big cities with large numbers of poor and minority children. Together with poor parents and their advocates, supporters in Congress, and those in the Office of Education, state departments of education, and local school districts responsible for monitoring the program, they formed a support network that buffered the program from political attack (Halperin 1975; Graham 1984, pp. 209–14; Thomas 1975, p. 81). But the price of this support was innovation. Though ESEA built an institutional support structure that helped guarantee its survival, it remained secondary to the main business of the schools. One result, as Kaestle and Smith (1982, p. 400) have observed, is that more than two decades later, the Great Society's major initiative to equalize educational opportunity for disadvantaged students stands "primarily as

a symbol of the national concern for the poor rather than as a viable response to their needs.”

Pointing to the resistance of local school officials to change their practices in response to federal mandates, several policy analysts have argued that, in the future, federal policies to aid educationally disadvantaged children must be made consonant with local needs. Because of the localistic bias in the politics of education and the administrative incapacity of the federal education bureaucracy to initiate change in local districts and control local practices, these policy analysts argue, federal policymakers must provide incentives for local districts to abide by federal regulations. Otherwise national policies will become enmeshed in endless jurisdictional disputes about compliance with federal regulations at the expense of improving educational practice (e.g., see Berman and McLaughlin 1978, pp. 220–22; Elmore and McLaughlin 1983; McDonnell and McLaughlin 1982).

There is a good deal of wisdom in this suggestion. Because of the ideology and structure of local control and the widespread suspicion of federal intervention in education, debates over the enactment and implementation of ESEA often focused more on the appropriate scope of federal power than on how best to improve education for disadvantaged children.²⁷ But the debates over ESEA were not just about the extension of federal power *per se*. They were also about the social purposes that informed what the federal government was trying to do. To imagine that the chief problem of federal policy is to find the right mix of incentives to induce local districts to shift their priorities in accordance with national standards or to design better programs and manage them more judiciously obscures much of what the disputes over Great Society educational policies were and continue to be about (Lazerson 1982).

At the same time, it would be misleading to ignore the limitations of the Great Society's educational agenda. Committed to expanding educational opportunity for the disadvantaged yet reluctant to challenge existing institutional arrangements and constrained by the government's institutional capacity to control local educational practices, it sought to enlarge opportunities for the poor at little cost to anyone who controlled or benefited from the existing educational system. But without either sufficient power or a concerted effort to disrupt the status quo, federal policy was unable to change how schools operated locally, at least not in a major way.

Because schools are locally based, such a movement to challenge the educational status quo must begin by empowering disenfranchised groups in local communities. Yet community-based action by itself is insufficient to alter school practices in the interests of the poor and

educationally disadvantaged. To be effective locally, national policy initiatives are necessary to establish a climate of reform, reallocate resources, and address more comprehensive issues, including the distribution of economic opportunity, that cannot be dealt with exclusively on a local level (Boyd, 1987). Indeed, the principal shortcoming of the Great Society was not just that it miscalculated the power of the federal government to initiate change locally but that it operated under political, structural, and ideological constraints that limited its effectiveness. If a renewed reform impulse fails to learn that lesson, its efforts will result in the same disillusionment that has undermined the educational aspirations and promises of the last two and a half decades.

Notes

I would like to thank Robert Lowe and David Tyack for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay and to express my appreciation to the National Academy of Education for the Spencer Fellowship that supported this research.

1. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was not, of course, the only major federal educational program launched in the 1960s. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations also initiated measures in vocational education, preschool education (Head Start), and higher education. I have focused here on ESEA because it was by far the largest and most ambitious of the new federal programs in elementary and secondary education and because its passage expanded and redefined the federal role in public education and together with judicially mandated changes set a precedent for succeeding federal interventions (most notably in bilingual education and education of the handicapped) in ways that the other measures did not. For general histories of federal education policies in the 1960s, see Jeffrey (1978) and Graham (1984). On the history of Head Start in particular, see Zigler and Valentine (1979).

2. The results of evaluations of the impact of the principal component of ESEA, Title I (and its successor, Chapter 1, passed in 1981), on educational achievement have varied widely over time and from program to program. Evaluations conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s found that, by and large, Title I had little, if any, positive impact on achievement. Later evaluations have been more favorable. They indicate that when funds are sufficiently concentrated, Title I/Chapter 1 students exhibit larger increases in math and reading test scores than do comparable students who do not participate in the program. But even these more optimistic studies generally conclude that the program's beneficial effects are most evident in the early grades, usually "wash out" in the junior and senior high school years, and have not substantially reduced, let alone eliminated, the achievement gap between poor and middle-class students as many of the legislation's proponents had initially anticipated it would. Indeed, if recent evaluations have reached more positive conclusions than those done 20 years ago, it is not only because the program has become somewhat more effective, but also, as Christopher Jencks has observed, because

our criteria for “success” have become much more modest than in 1965 when policymakers hoped that ESEA would not just improve the academic performance of students from poor families but actually equalize differences in achievement between disadvantaged students and those better off (Jencks 1986, pp. 173–79; for reviews of evaluations of ESEA, also see McLaughlin 1975; Levin 1977, pp. 153–58; Peterson 1983, pp. 96–100; Glazer 1986, pp. 153–79; Natriello, McDill, and Pallas 1990, pp. 72–78).

3. Most interpretations of social policy in the Great Society fall into these three categories. See Katznelson (1989, p. 188). For a similar categorization of federal social policy in the twentieth-century United States, see Hawley (1988, pp. 120–23). For a general review of the literature on the passage and implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, see Graham (1981, pp. 155–84).

4. Because most studies of federal education policy focus on the policy process, they fall into this category. Of these, Julie Roy Jeffrey’s study (1978) is by far the broadest in scope.

5. On this point, with reference to the Great Society in general, see Fraser and Gerstle (1989, pp. x–xi); Skocpol (1984).

6. On Johnson’s convictions regarding the role of education in eliminating poverty, also see Jeffrey (1978, chap. 2).

7. On Johnson’s view of the importance of education in his own life, also see his memoir *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963–1969* (1971, chap. 9).

8. Lewis himself recognized that his findings “might be misinterpreted or used to justify prejudices and stereotypes about the poor” and insisted that nothing in the concept of the culture of poverty was intended to put the “onus of poverty on the poor or their character” (Lewis 1969, p. 199).

9. Several scholars with different political sympathies have made this point. For example, see Katz (1989, p. 23); Mead (1986, pp. 57–60); Moynihan (1965, pp. 6–11).

10. On the political appeal of Keynesian economic policies to social democratic parties in western Europe, see Prezeworski (1985, pp. 207–10).

11. Most of the literature on ESEA focuses on this struggle. For example, see Eidenberg and Morey (1969); Thomas (1975); Graham (1984); Guthrie (1968).

12. Because each member of Congress represents a specific state or district and is deeply concerned about the territorial effects of distributive policies like ESEA, the allocation formula continued to be a matter of considerable debate and was amended several times after the legislation’s passage in 1965. But the principle of distributing aid to every district remained intact each time (Peterson et al. 1988, pp. 52–55).

13. After the legislation was passed, one congressman stated that ESEA, “in all candor, does not make much sense educationally; but it makes a hell of a lot of sense legally, politically, and constitutionally” (quoted in Eidenberg and Morey 1969, p. 93).

14. On the Congressional battle over the Kennedy school bill, see Price (1962).

15. Prior to 1950, the NAACP argued for equal distribution of federal aid but did not insist on prohibiting aid to segregated schools. See Munger and Fenno (1962, pp. 67–69) and, more generally, Kluger (1977).

16. The decision to terminate ESEA funds to school districts that violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act also confronted Office of Education and HEW

officials with a difficult dilemma: If they overlooked Title VI violations they seemed to be condoning segregation, yet if they cut off funds, they often hurt the students they were trying to help since many black students were also poor, and cutting off ESEA funds would deprive them of additional resources for their education (Bailey and Mosher 1968, p. 149).

17. On racial conflict and the fragmentation of the Democratic coalition after 1965, see Orfield (1988) and Rieder (1988).

18. This assumption informed most of the social programs initiated as part of the war on poverty. On this point, see Marris and Rein (1973, chap. 2).

19. Local educators' opposition to evaluation eventually abated. In 1981, when title I of ESEA became Chapter 1 of the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA), several districts continued to evaluate their federally sponsored compensatory education programs, even though Chapter 1 eliminated the evaluation requirement (until more specific requirements were added in 1983). But this local commitment to evaluation was not because local districts thought evaluation might empower poor parents, as Kennedy had hoped it might. By then, Kennedy's notion that evaluation could be used to provide information to poor parents so they could pressure the schools to change had been long forgotten. Indeed, Chapter 1 also eliminated a requirement instituted after the legislation's passage mandating parental involvement in the planning and governance of local Title I programs, but few districts tried to involve parents in the administration of compensatory education programs once they were no longer required to do so (McLaughlin 1990, p. 13).

20. On the relative administrative incapacity of the American federal state, also see Skocpol (1980); Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol (1988); Skowronek (1982).

21. One 1964 government task force report described the Office of Education as "the willing captive of school administrators and education associations" and almost totally lacking in the "creativity and innovative capacity" needed to assume major policy-formulating responsibilities, a view shared by many of those involved in planning and drafting ESEA (quoted in Graham 1984, p. 88).

22. The final version of the legislation included a provision that no federal official could exercise "any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials by any educational institution or school system."

23. On liberal ambivalence to centralized government authority in general, see Lowi (1969).

24. In 1972, researchers estimated that about three-quarters of the states were in noncompliance with the law (cited in McDonnell and McLaughlin 1982, pp. 90–91). On the use of funds for general purposes and other violations of ESEA Title I guidelines, see Washington Research Project (1969); Murphy (1973); Jeffrey (1978, chap. 4).

25. On the development of a separate Title I administrative structure and the dominance of pull-out strategies in compensatory programs, also see Elmore and McLaughlin (1983, p. 318); McDonnell and McLaughlin (1982, chap. 4); Kimborough and Hill (1981); McLaughlin (1976).

26. Several recent studies suggest that local districts have, over the last decade, become more committed to federal goals and that the administration of Title I/Chapter 1 programs has become more integrated with regular administrative procedures. Paul Peterson, Barry Rabe, and Kenneth Wong (1988)

argue that, since the early 1980s, states and local districts have increasingly accepted responsibility for improving education for economically and educationally disadvantaged students and that educators in several states, including Maryland, Florida, Wisconsin, and California, have made the federal compensatory education program part of their own state compensatory education efforts. Other studies, however, are less sanguine about the state and local commitment to the goals of the federal program. Milbrey McLaughlin and her colleagues have pointed out, for instance, that, with the passage of the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, many state and local activities initiated under Title I persisted even though the new legislation reduced federal requirements. But McLaughlin et al. also conclude that it is doubtful whether state and local commitment to the institutional structures and goals established under ESEA would remain if federal support and direction were substantially reduced (cited in Jung and Kirst 1986, pp. 91–93). Some researchers have also speculated that, by reducing federal regulation of local practices, Chapter 1 will focus attention on the content and instructional methods used in Chapter 1 programs rather than on fiscal compliance and that this will stimulate alternative strategies for the education of the poor. In the mid-1980s, however, over 75 percent of Chapter 1 schools continued to pull students out of the regular classroom to receive compensatory instruction, largely because state and local officials continued to believe that it was the easiest way to meet the requirements of the law, not because they thought this arrangement was pedagogically more effective (Smith 1988, pp. 128–30). Indeed, in recent years, several educators and researchers have questioned the pedagogical effectiveness of the pull-out approach. They argue that it stigmatizes Chapter 1 students, fragments the instructional program for these students, and removes the responsibility for educating these students from the regular classroom teacher. Yet stigmatization and fragmentation are not unique to pull-out programs. Other researchers contend that many in-class Chapter 1 practices also suffer from these problems since they, too, require that children be identified and that separate instruction be administered. As Marshall Smith (1988) has observed, the instructional problems that have troubled ESEA/Chapter 1 have less to do with the particular form the program has taken than with the political relationships and institutional constraints that dictated the need to identify and instruct students separately.

27. On the way the fragmented organization of American government shapes national debates about social and economic policy more generally, see Weir (1988, pp. 188–89).

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