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Lessons

Edward B. Fiske

In Kentucky, teachers, not legislators, will be writing the lesson plans.

FRANKFORT, Ky.

When it comes to education, Kentucky has rarely made much of a splash. Centre College in Danville upset mighty Harvard in football in 1921, and Sherleen Sisney, a Louisville high school teacher, became National Teacher of the Year in 1984. But by and large the Bluegrass State has been content to paddle the backwaters of American public education.

Then last Thursday the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, in one fell, court-ordered swoop, enacted the most sweeping education package ever conceived by a state legislature.

In doing so the Kentucky lawmakers may well have signaled the eclipse of one of the most stifling educational trends of the last decade: the growing control by state education departments over how teachers and students spend their time. "Let's hope that the changes in Kentucky are a harbinger of changes to come in other states," said Frank Newman, president of the Education Commission of the States.

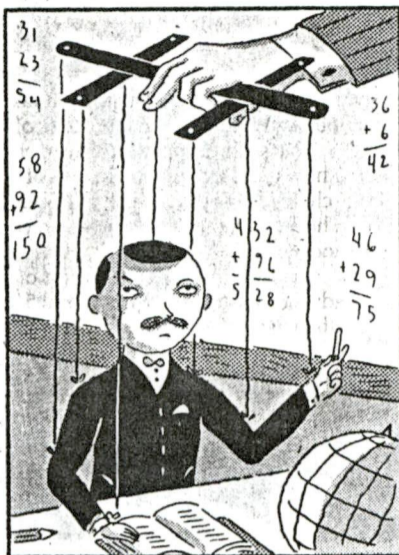
The trend toward state control of local schools dates to the early 1970's, when state legislatures, seeking to equalize school spending, began supplementing education spending to assist property-poor districts. As a result, states now supply slightly more than 50 percent of the money for public schools, up from less than 39 percent in 1970.

Then came the school reform movement of the 1980's. Pressured by business leaders and others to improve the quality of schools, governors and state legislators did what politicians usually do in such situations: They imposed thousands of new rules and regulations.

In Texas, legislators wrote detailed lesson plans into state law. Kentucky's soon-to-be-repealed regulations even spell out the precise number of minutes that teachers must devote to each subject each day. Teachers have been known to interrupt a heated literary discussion because they haven't done that day's 12 minutes of health education.

The new system in Kentucky, which will be adopted over a five-year period starting in January, moves in the opposite direction. By 1995, the state's 178 school districts must surrender control of local school budgets and educational programs to boards of three teachers, two parents and the principal.

All of Kentucky's current education regulations will be repealed, and the State Education Department will get out of the regulating business. Its role will be to set learning goals for each subject and grade and to develop



Drawings by Michael Klein

ways to assess whether students are meeting them.

No one underestimates the power that the new state bureaucracy will wield. It will set the learning agenda for students and award financial bonuses to staff members of schools where students exceed specified learning goals. It will also send in outside teachers and administrators — already known around here as the "S.W.A.T. Team" — to take over, and even shut down, chronically failing schools.

But the Kentucky lawmakers have made an all-important distinction between leadership and control. The department may not tell teachers and principals in successful schools how to run their classes. "Regulation is for schools that are failing, not for ones that are succeeding," said Jack Foster, secretary of the Governor's education and culture cabinet.

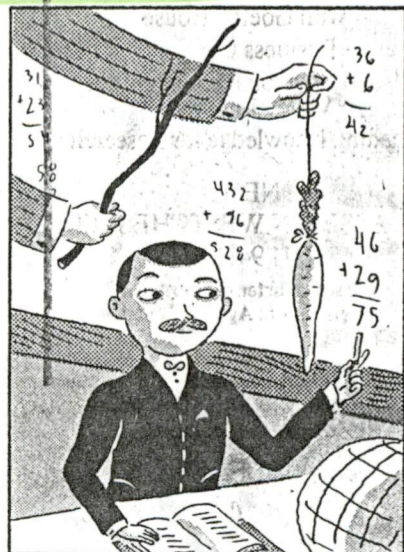
Adopting the new approach will be tricky. Much will depend on the skill and vision of the person chosen to be the first commissioner of education. Meanwhile, the assessment process will depend on techniques yet to be developed.

The new legislation also has a few internal contradictions. For example, Dennis Boswell, principal of the Conway Middle School in Louisville, noted that his school is already operating in the decentralized manner called for in the new legislation, although its management team does not fit the prescribed formula. "It doesn't make any sense to give teachers and principals the authority to make their own decisions and then tell them how to go about doing it," he said.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Kentucky's reform effort was the nature of the political struggle that surrounded it. As one might expect, most of the horse trading revolved around fiscal matters like the new formulas for distributing state aid to poor school districts.

Conspicuously missing, though, were concerns on the part of local school boards that they were being stripped of virtually all their control over curriculums, textbooks and other educational decisions. Instead, lobbyists for the Kentucky School Boards Association concentrated their resources on a futile battle to prevent the enactment of anti-nepotism provisions that will bar them from putting their relatives on the school payroll.

"It's a metaphor for the way the old system works," Mr. Foster said. "People care more about controlling schools than controlling education."



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... on Education

PRESIDENT TRANSMITS "EDUCATION EXCELLENCE ACT OF 1989" TO HILL

On April 5, President Bush sent a wide-ranging education reform package to Congress, entitled the "Education Excellence Act of 1989." This legislation embodies several principles central to education reform. First, excellence and achievement in education should be recognized and rewarded. Second, federal dollars should help those most in need. Third, greater flexibility and choice in education -- both parental choice in selecting schools for their children and local school systems' choice of teachers and principals -- are essential. Finally, the President supports educational accountability, and is committed to measuring and rewarding progress toward quality education.

The bill includes seven specific legislative initiatives:

The Presidential Merit Schools program would reward schools which make substantial progress in raising students' educational achievement, creating a safe and drug-free school environment, and reducing the drop-out rate. Public and private elementary and secondary schools would be eligible for cash awards.

A new Magnet Schools of Excellence program would support the establishment, expansion, or enhancement of magnet schools. Magnet schools are an important instrument of choice -- a means of promoting healthy competition to attract students and create an incentive for educational innovation.

The Alternative Certification of Teachers and Principals program would provide incentives for States to develop, expand or improve flexible certification systems designed to draw into education talented professionals who have demonstrated their subject area competence and leadership qualities.

The President's Awards for Excellence in Education would be given to public and private school teachers in every State who meet the highest standards of excellence.

Drug-Free Schools Urban Emergency Grants would provide special assistance for a comprehensive range of services to selected urban school districts that are disproportionately affected by drug trafficking and abuse.

A National Science Scholars program would provide scholarships to high school seniors who have excelled in the sciences and mathematics.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities would be provided with additional funding for endowment matching grants, an effective way to create financial strength and long-term financial security.

Urging the Congress to take prompt action on the legislation, the President said, "I believe that greater educational achievement promotes sustained economic growth, enhances the Nation's competitive position in world markets, increases productivity, and leads to higher incomes for everyone. The Nation must invest in its young people, giving them the knowledge, skills and values to live productive lives."

BUSH OUTLINES INITIATIVE IN SERIES OF EVENTS WITH STUDENTS

Over the last ten days, the President met with education leaders and students before announcing his legislative proposal. In a succession of events -- from a visit to local James Madison High School, to a question-and-answer session with students from the Close Up Foundation, to an address before the Association of Community and Junior Colleges -- President Bush reached out to those on the front lines of education reform.

He told students during the Close Up event on March 29, "These are your schools and they exist to serve you, and you have the right to demand the best from your teachers and from your

schools. You can expect excellence from your schools and you can make them work for you. So where school is concerned, it's not a matter of like it or leave it. It's like it or change it. "

CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS LINE UP IN SUPPORT OF LEGISLATION

At the time the White House Wire went to press, key Congressional leaders in education issues had cosponsored the "Educational Excellence Act of 1989," including:

The Senate Republican leadership has moved quickly to line up support for the bill, led by Robert Dole (R-KS); Alan Simpson (R-WY); John Chafee (R-RI); Don Nickles (R-OK). Democrats David Boren (D-OK) and Claiborne Pell (D-RI), education subcommittee chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, have also cosponsored. The ranking member of the full committee, Orrin Hatch (R-UT), has joined the principal cosponsor in the Senate, Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), who is the education subcommittee's ranking member. The ranking member of the Appropriations subcommittee on education, Arlen Specter (R-PA) in cosponsoring as well. There are a total of 34 Senate cosponsors to date.

In the House, the Republican leadership has marshalled strong support as well, led by Robert Michel (R-IL); Newt Gingrich (R-GA); Jerry Lewis (R-CA); Bill McCollom (R-FL); and Mickey Edwards (R-OK). The principal cosponsor, Bill Goodling (R-PA) is ranking member of the Education and Labor Committee, as well as of the education subcommittee. Also, Silvio Conte (R-MA), ranking member of the Appropriations subcommittee on education is cosponsoring, along with 69 other House cosponsors.

SUPPORT BUILDS ACROSS NATION FOR EDUCATION REFORM

Enthusiastic supporters of the President's goals for improving education are speaking out all over the country -- from elected officials, teachers, business leaders and members of the media. Giving parents and students educational choice, and promoting excellence in all classrooms are the talk of many concerned Americans:

"If we are to maintain our position as a leader among the industrialized nations and if we are to compete successfully internationally, we must attack the education deficit now. The Educational Excellence Act and other education initiatives proposed by President Bush hold solid promise of strengthening the education structure and fostering improvement throughout our education system." -- Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos

"This is an excellent initiative." -- Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI), chairman of the Senate education subcommittee

"To be successful, the new agenda for school reform must be driven by competition and market discipline ... the objective should be clear from the outset: complete restructuring ... The public schools must change if they are to survive." -- David Kearns, Chairman and CEO, Xerox Corp.

"We must remember who is ultimately responsible for children. Now is the time to empower parents ... Choice is the key." -- Governor Rudy Perpich (D-MN)

"Parental choice can provide the catalyst for educational reform by introducing a market mechanism to the public educational system." -- Sy Fliegel, former administrator, East Harlem District 4

"We propose an idea in the great American tradition: you can increase excellence by increasing choice." -- National Governors' Association, Time for Results

"The system needs a complete overhaul, and not just more tinkering." -- The Wall Street Journal, March 31, 1989

"We are extremely pleased that the alternate route to teacher certification, which has worked so well in New Jersey, is now getting support at the national level. President Bush's legislative proposal can help other states duplicate New Jersey's success in bringing thousands of qualified alternate route teachers into our classrooms." -- Governor Thomas H. Kean (R-NJ)

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