

# Inside Washington

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*There shall be in the Department of the Interior a Bureau called the Office of Education, the purpose and duties of which shall be to collect statistics and facts showing the condition and progress of education in the several States and Territories. . . .*

—Legislation authorizing an Office of Education, June 22, 1874.

A century after Reconstruction-era legislators instructed the new U.S. Office of Education to “collect statistics and facts” on American education, Congress this July took away a major fact-finding responsibility from the commissioner of education and gave it a new bureaucratic prominence.

With the passage of the Education Amendments of 1974 Congress moved the existing National Center for Education Statistics out of the Office of Education and established it as a quasi-independent agency within the office of the assistant secretary for education. The expanded center will be led by a specially appointed administrator and will have an eleven-member advisory council named by the secretary of health, education and welfare. In its first year the upgraded center is authorized to spend up to \$5 million on salaries and \$20 million on grants and contracts.

The existing center, run by an assistant commissioner, grew out of bureaucratic reshuffling in the 1960s when statistical duties originally performed by operating agencies were shifted upstairs. The resulting arrangement did not produce the best results, apparently. A Syracuse University Research Corporation report on the current center's activities pointed out that:

1. “Information is seldom organized and presented within a policy-relevant framework,”
2. “Information that is collected and disseminated is rarely analyzed,”
3. “Long delays in publication reach scandalous proportions,” and
4. “Numerous gaps exist in the availability of data required to answer policy questions.”

In conclusion, said the investigators, “The real problem is that USOE has not effectively undertaken the task of providing an overview of the entire educational landscape.”<sup>1</sup>

But this latest congressional interest in the data-gathering capacity of the educational bureaucracy was triggered by frustrations of legislators trying to weigh the effects of delicate changes in federal impact aid formulas proposed as part of the new education bill. Representative Carl Perkins, chairman of the House subcommittee on education, complained that “the collection and dissemination of educational statistics today is in a sorry state. The federal government, which should have conscientiously over the years performed the task of collecting and disseminating accurate and current data on education, has simply not fulfilled this responsibility.”<sup>2</sup>

Perkins' statement came during hearings on a House bill introduced by himself and Representative Al Quie (HR 13991) which would have given the secretary of HEW one year to come up with a better way to make statistics available. The Perkins-Quie bill eventually influenced a conference package resolving numerous differences between the major House and Senate elementary and secondary education bills, including the fact that the House version did not include any section on educational statistics.

The Senate version of the education bill called for the establishment of an entirely separate statistical agency within the Education Division of OE with a director on the same pay level as the commissioner of education and an assistant director who would be a top-level career civil servant. This center was to have been guided by a six-person board appointed by the president of the United States which was to be “a strong policy-making body, not merely a rubber stamp either for the director of the Center or for the Education Division,” according to the Senate report. “The committee cannot stress too strongly its intention of creating a responsive and reliable source of educa-

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Joel S. Berke, Syracuse University Research Corp., testimony on HR 13991 before the General Education Subcommittee, House Committee on Education and Labor; May 7, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Rep. Carl Perkins, opening statement during hearings on HR 13991 before the General Education Subcommittee, House Committee on Education and Labor; May 7, 1974.



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tion statistics, totally free of bias and political influence.”<sup>3</sup>

The final compromise version of the law contains most of the Senate provisions but places the center and its advisory panel under the direct authority of the assistant secretary.

Under the new law the expanded center will “collect, collate, and, from time to time, report full and complete statistics on the conditions of education in the United States,” make special analyses available in reports, assist state and local education agencies in improving and automating their own statistical activities, and report on educational activities abroad. Through the assistant secretary the center can make grants and enter into contracts for data with public and private organizations and can work in consort with other federal agencies and with nonprofit private organizations to develop data.

The material compiled by the center is to be made available to scholars, government officials, and anybody else who asks for it. “The Center is authorized to furnish transcripts or copies of tables and other statistical records . . . and to make special statistical compilations and surveys for state or local officials, public and private organizations or individuals.” The data is to be provided “subject to the payment of the actual or estimated cost of such work.”

On March 1 of every year the assistant secretary must produce an annual report to Congress describing what the center has done, how much it has spent, and including “a statistical report on the condition of education in the United States during the two preceding fiscal years and a projection, for the three succeeding fiscal years, of estimated statistics. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

What does this mean for libraries, and will it be any different from existing practices within the center as run by the Office of Education?

For one thing it provides some hope of finally obtaining accurate, up-to-date figures which can be used to project library usage, directions for interlibrary cooperation, and trends in institutional growth. Under the center, as it functioned within the Office of Education, the output of library statistics has been criticized as erratic and often too generalized. An upgraded center could change this.

On the other hand, the future performance of the center will depend almost entirely on pressure from the public and Congress. Asked what immediate effect the change in status would mean for the center and its data-gathering activities, a top education official replied, “You don’t just bring about a change by making something more important.” Substantive improvement in the quantity and quality of statistical work will depend on how much money is appropriated by Congress and what kind of

top-echelon leadership is provided, the official said.

At the earliest, improvements will be a year in coming. The advisory council must be named and an administrator selected, programs must be designed and staff expanded to take on greater administrative and analytical tasks. At the moment salaries for the existing center are running about \$3.5 million a year for the 170 statisticians and support personnel. In fiscal year 1976 the bill authorizes Congress to appropriate \$10 million for salaries. But the question remains whether the legislators will be as interested in educational data next year as they are now.

However, there is some sense of motion. The existing center is developing a Library General Information Survey (LIBGIS I) which will provide uniform statistics nationwide on school library/media centers and public libraries. This project will be continued under the new center, undoubtedly.

And in the debate over the final bill, Perkins made a special plea for greater attention to library statistics. “Recognizing the importance of library and learning resources to the educational process,” he said, “I would strongly urge this new National Center to conduct an annual survey of academic libraries, school libraries and media centers and public libraries. The Center should also conduct at least one survey of special libraries.”<sup>5</sup>

While such specific instructions are not part of the law itself, they show what the subcommittee chairman had in mind when the law was written. ■ ■

<sup>3</sup> Senate Report 93-763, p.80.

<sup>4</sup> See Senate Report 93-1026.

<sup>5</sup> *Congressional Record*, July 31, 1974, p.H7396.

The Business Reference Services Committee of the Reference and Adult Services Division, American Library Association, is collecting sample brochures describing programs and services available to the business community at specific public, academic, and special libraries. Libraries having issued such brochures are requested to mail one copy of each to Richard L. King, Chairman, Business Reference Services Committee, c/o Business, Economics and Geography Reference Department, Library, California State University, 6101 E. 7th St., Long Beach, CA 90840.