

TOWARD A MODEL OF RELEVANT INCLUSION

The Midwest Program in School Desegregation  
and Equal Educational Opportunity

Indianapolis Workshop: A Progress Report

Sponsored by:

The Center for Inner City Studies  
Northeastern Illinois State College

Illinois Commission on Human Relations  
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle  
Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith

February, 1969

Funded by Grant #OEG-O-8-000365-4515(036) under Title  
IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by the U. S. Office  
of Education

the Midwest Program in School Desegregation and  
Equal Educational Opportunity - February, 1969<sup>65</sup>  
GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

John L. McKnight

We have been asked to discuss how government programs can aid in securing equity of educational opportunity. In one sense, this is a very unusual subject because it is based upon the assumption that government has an important role in establishing the rights of men to an equal education. A great lawyer who is a friend of mine would say this is a false assumption. He is quite fond of reminding me of his belief that, through the ages, the single greatest threat to the rights of free men has not been business, capitalism, labor, religion, or even racism. It has been, he says, the institution that we call government.

Now this isn't a very startling notion. It was, in fact, a central idea of the founders of this nation. Most of them believed that the rights of man were in greatest jeopardy of violation by the state. Indeed, this was the premise of our own Bill of Rights which was a guarantee of individual freedoms for private men and their associations, exchanged for a grant to government of those minimum powers necessary to provide for the common good. It is, therefore, a relatively novel and recent idea, developed in the last several decades, that government is a benevolent entity as it relates to issues of individual rights. Indeed, many of us have been raised in an era where we, in direct contrast to many of our founding fathers, view government as the key institution for providing the opportunity for people to achieve their rights. In our



time, this notion has been carried so far that many of us actually see government as an instrument not only for establishing individual rights, but for empowering the powerless as well. Indeed, there is much talk that the institutionalized state, dominated by the interest of the majority, will and can become an agency for building the opportunity of minorities to gain equity in terms of power.

We ought to examine that premise, particularly as it relates to people who live in inner-city neighborhoods, because these are the people in urbanized America who live the most powerless lives. These are the people who have had the least ability to determine their own fate--and that ability is what real freedom is all about.

In approaching the problem of empowering the powerless, the Federal government has generally utilized its traditional structures and program designs. Congress has enacted legislation funding programs that are supposed to deal with those problems that are particular to the inner-city. After the money is appropriated, the Executive is assigned the responsibility for administering the laws, mainly through the Department of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Health, Education and Welfare, and the Office of Economic Opportunity. Each of these Departments then specifically defines how the money should be spent and passes the funding to their constituents. Here, it is very important for us to recognize who the Federal bureaucrats in these Departments regard as their real constituency. Basically, the federal bureaucrat's constituency is state level bureaucrats because Federally funded programs are



mainly translated through state governments. State bureaucrats then translate most of the funding to their constituency--local governments.

It is very important to recognize that it is this system that controls the design, administration, and audit of programs legislated by Congress. Therefore, all down the pipeline the X basic concern of each administrator tends to be his relationship with administrators in other governments rather than the relationship of his program to the empowerment of people. In effect, the chief constituency of government employees is government employees. This fact ultimately expresses itself at the end of the government pipeline where, with the exception of some brick and mortar and loan programs, local government spends most of the money to hire government employees.

Now lets look again at the man in the inner-city whose central problem is the lack of power to determine his future. His local government spends the money to employ case workers, building inspectors, policemen, public health nurses, poverty workers, parole officers, employment office personnel, teachers, narcotic agents, unemployment compensation officials, truant officers, civil rights officials, public housing officials, job training personnel, urban renewal officials, youth commission officials--each ready to serve, to help, the inner-city man. Picture that man, ringed by this array of "helping" publicly-supported professionals and officials, and ask what they mean to him, to his sense of self-determination, to his sense of freedom.

Perhaps those of us in the middle-class can better X



understand his reaction if we consider how many of these publicly supported officials or professionals we have ever dealt with. Certainly, very few of them. Indeed, we middle class citizens rarely deal with any official other than agents of the Internal Revenue Service, and we describe them as though they were robbing us of everything from our birthright to our manhood. In fact, the government and most of its agents, employees, and rules are involved in setting the boundaries of life of men who must live in inner-cities. Our empowering, freeing dollar usually provides the means for defining the game one must play to survive in a second class status in the inner-city. For no matter how potentially beneficial any or all of the professionals and officials may be, their very presence and programs tell the inner-city resident that he is powerless, because they have the power to make the rules and administer the "benefits" that really control his life. Definitionally, the present system practically assures that that man will not feel self-determining. And a man without a sense of self-determination will have no real commitment to the development of the broader society. So, in significant measure, our recent Federal efforts that many felt were designed to provide opportunities for the empowerment of the powerless have too often provided men who want to determine their own fate with a system that determines their fate for them. This failure is compounded by the fact that X the system also spends the dollars that the inner-city man could use to make some real choices determining his own fate, on salaries of professionals and officials employed by government and private social agencies.

The question we now face is whether things have to be this way. Is there nothing government can do to aid the empowerment of the powerless? Is there no alternative to the powerless battling, with only the resources outside of Federal government, to achieve the goals of equity?

I think there are some precedents that indicate the Federal government can play a significant role in providing opportunities in modern society for the individual to extend his power to achieve equity from a position of non-equity. To find such a precedent, we need to look at systems and programs that were designed by the majority of white people for white people they cared about.

It seems to me that one of the most recent and illustrative examples occurred when millions of potentially angry, under-educated, poor young white people cascaded into the general society. We called these people GI's. They were the brothers and sons of most Americans. So the majority of our people said of these men we cared about, "We want our government to act in a way that will bring these men to a position of parity and equity, in a society where they have not been able to participate."

How did government approach this mandate?

First, I think it is important to note what government did not do. It did not spend its money on creating a system that employed an army of government and private agency people to help the GI achieve equity and parity. It did not basically create new government institutions to train and house the veteran.



A different concept was developed. Government looked at this man-brother-son who missed much education, had no income and very little savings. Government recognized that the system saw him as worthless. Having the mandate to provide equity for him, government acted to make him literally valuable. Essentially, government put a dollar on the veteran's head. Government decided to make him a man who was valuable to the educational institutions and housing industry of this country. By making him valuable, these institutions sought to meet his needs in return for the value that he represented. Our system acted affirmatively to transmit to him the advantages it could provide.

Perhaps the most important aspect of programs that put the dollar on the GI's head was the freedom of choice-making that they provided. He was allowed to choose the kind of education he wanted, and the place where he would be educated. He received a generally sufficient stipend to support himself and his family while he was getting his education. He was allowed to choose the kind of home he wanted, and the place where he would have a home. He had the maximum opportunity within the system to make real choices for himself.

Again, it is important to note what government didn't do. The government did not develop a completely distinct and second-rate, non-integrative system to train and house the GI. X Rather, government empowered the GI with dollars that he could use to make real choices in the existing system. The government paid for the choices that he made, rather than hiring people to define and administer choices for him.



Today, we should measure government action in the inner-city by the kinds of programs developed for GI's because they were essentially non-racist in design.

First, they were programs that gave the individual maximum choice. Second, those choices were in all of the existing normative institutions of the society. The effectiveness of this system is best indicated by those ex-veterans, now in their 40's, who often complain about Federal expenditures for inner-city programs. "I made it on my own," they say. "Why can't those people pull themselves up by their bootstraps like I did." He has forgotten the fact that the Federal government literally empowered him by providing ten league boots through a multi-billion dollar program that bought good housing and a good education that allowed him to bargain effectively for a good job. In a sense, his current feeling proves the point we are making: the government acted to empower him through programs that did not rob him of his sense of freedom. Indeed, the government action was so effective that it empowered him and he frequently doesn't even recognize that fact. He believes he did it on his own. The program built his sense of self-determination and dignity even though it was essential to his present level of achievement.

Does the system of programming for G.I. empowerment have relevance for inner-city education today? While we are caught up in a struggle that has focused on remedies such as school integration or community control, it might be well to ask whether there are other approaches to achieving equity in education results. Certainly there are many critics who suggest that



big-city school systems are so bereft of resources that, integrated or locally controlled, the needs of individual students will not be served, that real empowerment will not result.

Therefore, it may be well to ask whether some educational purchase programs should be established--programs that would reimburse students for their educational costs at public or private institutions of their choice. In addition to empowering students and their families to make real choices, such a program would stimulate competition between educational systems and create new institutions unburdened by the history, personnel and fiscal considerations of the past.

Whatever is done to achieve educational equity, the point is that the final answer is not defined by integration or local control. It is defined by fate control. Free men must have real choices, and choices do not exist without the power to make them. If our government, or any other institution, does not provide the people of the inner-city the reality of effective individual choice, then it is merely programming for rebellion--regardless of all the good intentions.