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**U.S. Ministry of Education**  
**by**  
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In many countries around the world, the top education policymaking organization is the Ministry of Education. The Minister of Education who heads the ministry is ordinarily a non-elective government position held by a person with extensive educational and political credentials, appointed by the Prime Minister or other head of state. The Minister directs education policy at all levels of the national system from basic, secondary, higher, vocational and adult education. In addition, the ministry of education may refer to an extensive organizational apparatus designed to implement the national curriculum, achieve national goals, and assess national results. The parallel position in the U.S. would be the Secretary of Education. However, in the U.S. system, the Secretary of Education only recommends policies and provides incentives for federally sponsored initiatives. Is this role about to change? As a nation, are we becoming more global in our perspective on the way education policy and practice will be overseen by emulating this type of centralized ministry form of administration and oversight for education?

On a recent trip to the nation's capital for a national meeting, I heard many conversations about the "new" Department of Education (DOE), the "new" Institute for Educational Science (IES), and "new" favored approaches to educational research and funding of such research. I began to wonder if the conservative movement had given up its quest of a few years ago to *eliminate* the DOE and instead *transform* the DOE into an American ministry of education. Such a ministry would have the power to decide educational policy at the federal level that directly impacted local schools and classrooms. If so, this would be a significant historical and political shift in U.S. education policy with major repercussions for states like Missouri where I live and work

— a state which has always considered itself a strong proponent of *local* control of education. This essay examines briefly the ministry of education as the organizing principle used in other parts of the world and questions whether that is a new path that the U.S. wants to take.

In Japan, for example, the Ministry of Education makes staffing decisions; it can and does tell beginning teachers the prefecture, or province, where they will be assigned to live and teach. The Japanese ministry develops and disseminates a national curriculum, which is then uniformly taught throughout the country. A single national assessment instrument is commonplace, often one developed by an American testing company such as CTB/McGraw Hill. Colleges, graduate schools and teacher training institutions and technical schools all come under the aegis of the ministry, as does all K-12 education. The following excerpt from the website of the Japanese Minister of Education provides a glimpse of the ministry's basic responsibilities for elementary and secondary education:

In order to advance elementary and secondary education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau is responsible for establishing curriculum standards in elementary schools, lower and upper secondary schools, secondary education schools, schools for the blind, the deaf, and the other disabled children and kindergartens. It is also responsible for the enhancement of student guidance and career guidance, the promotion of education of Japanese children living overseas, and the free provision and authorization of textbooks. Lastly, the Bureau is responsible for the system for local education, systems related to government employees working in education, class composition and staffing numbers for schools, the payment of teaching staff, and the improvement of public school facilities. [From the Ministry of Education website <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/shotou/index.htm>]

In the field of higher education, the Japanese Ministry has the following additional goals and responsibilities:

In order to advance higher education, the Higher Education Bureau is responsible for the formulation of basic policies for higher education, the establishment and authorization of universities, junior colleges and colleges of technology, selection of new students and the conferring of degrees, duties related to student welfare guidance, scholarships, and the promotion of student exchanges. In addition, to promote private education, the Bureau is also responsible for approving the establishment of educational corporations, guidance and assistance on the management of educational corporations, and the provision of assistance toward private school education.

[<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/koutou/index.htm>]

Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, and most African and European nations--indeed, most of the rest of the world have this type of overarching national control of education. In many countries, such as the Netherlands, the ministry may also exercise considerable control over religious schools. Many countries, including the UK and South Africa, also have inspectorates as part of the ministry who visit local communities to observe, rate and classify schools, curricula, teachers, and students.

Historically and politically, this has not been the case in the United States. For a variety of fundamental political and constitutional reasons (including the states' rights to reserve power to themselves under the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment), education policy has been the prerogative of the individual states and local communities. Since Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, Americans have viewed education as a community obligation, with important connections to the foundations of good citizenship as well as economic progress. The burden of paying for education falls on the states and local governments, in particular on the local property taxpayers. Over the past 200 years the U.S. educational system has evolved into a complex mosaic of public, private, sectarian and nonsectarian learning organizations with many different local missions and a decidedly decentralized mechanism of control and authority. With the recent No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act, that characteristic decentralization appears to be undergoing change in certain fundamental ways.

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for mandatory annual testing rather than periodic testing that most schools use, shifting time and resource expenditures away from daily instruction and into repeated assessments, a shift which many educators

believe is inimical to good teaching and learning, resulting in a one-size-fits-all curriculum and "teaching to the test" instead of enriched learning experiences for students. The legislation also calls for continuous monitoring and a variety of financial and professional sanctions (to be imposed by the state under penalty of loss of federal funding) against schools and educators who "fail" the children in their care. Despite a beginning teacher shortage, veteran teacher-burnout, and a mid-career teacher retention crisis, teachers may lose their jobs and their licenses if they cannot demonstrate "value added" to a student's academic performance within three years regardless of the child's socioeconomic milieu. Despite a severe and growing lack of prepared administrators, principals could lose their positions as school leaders; and schools could face closure if enough informed parents exercise their option to relocate their children out of underperforming schools to high performing schools, with the baseline for "performance" again being benchmarked by the central authority in Washington. The law promotes competition in the form of charter schools and other "innovations" that reputedly remove the schools from bureaucratic overmanagement by the states. In some quarters there is even discussion of eliminating popularly elected school boards.

There seems to be an upside-down, "through the looking-glass" quality to these developments. The political movement that espouses *less* federal intervention in citizen's daily lives now seeks to control and manage schooling and teacher preparation at the state and local level, all the way from determining the definition of "high quality teachers" to the nature of teachers' preparation, certification, supervision, and compensation, as well as the research methods appropriate for examining educational practices. The U. S. Department of Education is promulgating rigorous standards and reviews for "traditional" teacher preparation programs and yet no standards or review at all for "alternative" and other "private-sector" providers in a market-driven, come-one, come-all entrepreneurial adventure. Since the Reagan administration, this same group of radical conservative thinkers and policymakers have been seeking to "devolve" responsibility to the states and localities for any number of public services and government programs (welfare and environment, for example). But on education policy, this group is going in the opposite direction, a 180 degree shift, toward more leverage, more uniformity and more conformity in planning, delivery, assessment, and funding.

One might ask "Why? Why now?" It is difficult to believe that the reasons do not have more to do with political agendas than sound educational policy.

Since the 1970's, courts have ruled that education is a state obligation, guaranteed under state constitutions, not a federally protected "right" or federal obligation, except as to equal protection of the laws under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (see *San Antonio v. Rodriguez, 1973*). Interpreting state responsibilities in the realm of education in this way has meant that state legislatures and state courts--and yes, state departments of education--have been the primary focal points in the struggle for equality, equity and now "adequacy" in providing state educational resources for all children.

Is it premature to call this new shift a federal takeover of education? Perhaps. Education is one of the most expensive and the most strategic public services, second only to national defense; yet the federal government typically only pays 7% of the costs of schooling, with this amount going mainly for support of poor children under Title I. Vermont's governor has decided to forego this *de minimus* federal support, thus becoming exempt from unfounded mandates of No Child Left Behind. Before this could be considered an attempted federal "takeover" of education, however, there would have to be a significant scaling up of the federal contribution to the cost of educating our next generation, not merely as an assumption of control over policy matters. Still, the handwriting on the wall seems to be resolving into a clear message: Get your local and state acts together, or we will do it for you. The clock is running. You have a deadline. No excuses.

Many K-12 educators have been waiting for this kind of "no excuses" mindset and a "no excuses" budget to support education and the elimination or substantial narrowing of the inequalities within our society. Such inequities often directly result from the quality of a person's education and frequently too result in continuing lifelong disparities in wealth, access, and power. But the "no excuse" approach in No Child Left Behind is not exactly what educators had in mind. At the local and state level, educators want to be partners with the "feds" not their lackeys. Ministries of education, with centralized power, might function perfectly well in other places, even in other democratic cultures such as Canada; however, the United States is not exactly like other

countries. We share the responsibilities of government according to a well-designed plan of federal, state and local collaboration.

Teachers, teacher educators, state and local policymakers want to be included in the decision-making. Educators--along with the rest of society including parents, media, churches, and communities--are willing to be accountable for the education of the next generation. We just want to count as a significant voice in formulating educational strategies, and we know that complex educational outcomes cannot be reduced to single-point-in-time standardized test scores. If the "new" U.S. Ministry of Education plans to direct all of our educational enterprise from the central government, the local voices seem in danger of being lost in proportion to their geographical and/or ideological distance from Washington, D.C.

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