3-31-1950

Dangers of Federal Aid for Education

Strom Thurmond

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Recommended Citation
Thurmond, Strom, "Dangers of Federal Aid for Education" (1950). Strom Thurmond Collection, Mss100. 851.
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The Dangers of Federal Aid For Education

ADDRESS OF

J. STROM THURMOND
GOVERNOR OF SOUTH CAROLINA

BEFORE THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE

South Carolina Education Association

COLUMBIA, S. C.

MARCH 31, 1950
Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

One group of South Carolinians with whom I feel at home is our school teachers. All my life I have fought for the cause of education in South Carolina. I have always been keenly interested in our educational problems.

For 10 years I was directly associated with our educational system, 6 years of this time as a teacher in the public schools, and 4 years as County Superintendent of Education in my home county of Edgefield. As a member of the State Senate, I sponsored legislation for higher salaries for teachers and longer school terms, and I was Chairman of the Senate Committee that wrote the present school attendance law. As Governor, I recommended and the Legislature passed the best teacher-pay schedule in the history of the State, the State School Survey, provision for the Area Trade Schools, and many other progressive educational measures.

Today South Carolina is at the highest educational level in her history. Our State's educational effort has steadily advanced until we are now 11th from the top in the percentage of income spent for education. A few years ago, we were 25th.

Our progress, however, is far from enough to make our schools the vital instruments of public service they should and must be. This year, I recommended to the General Assembly a forward-looking school program, which included increasing teacher salaries; an expanded in-service teacher training program; restoration of sick leave for teachers; loan scholarships for teacher education; state aid for school buildings; better organization of school districts; and an equitable formula for distribution of school transportation funds. I reiterate my support of these objectives and will work shoulder to shoulder with you in seeking to bring them about.

Our educational problems have been more difficult to solve because we have not been a rich state. We have been near the bottom among states in per capita income, and in income per pupil in average daily attendance. While our effort has been high our income has been low.

A number of those interested in education in our State have in the past sincerely believed that the speedy solution of our educational problems may lie in the passage of legislation granting
federal aid for our public school system. Their theory has been
that federal aid will come to the rescue of the so-called poorer
states by providing greater assistance when the need is greater.

Today I want to discuss this matter with you as honestly and
frankly as I know how. Because of my interest in any proposal
that will improve our educational system, the question of Federal
aid has deeply interested me, and I have given it my most
earnest consideration.

Several years ago I publicly advocated federal aid for public
education, provided that such aid be without Federal control
and the State public school system remain entirely under local
control where it belongs.

With the growing centralization of power in the Federal
government, and the flagrant violation and disregard of the
rights of states and local authorities by the present national ad­
ministration, I have been forced to the firm conviction that we
cannot accept federal aid for our public schools without ulti­
mately losing control of them to the federal government.

I have also been forced to the conclusion that even if we should
escape nationalization of our public school system in accepting
federal aid, restrictions will soon be imposed which will prevent
the states with the greatest educational need from receiving fed­
eral funds.

The vital issue confronting us is whether we can maintain a
locally-supported and locally-controlled public school system.
This nation has grown great because of our free public schools.
They are the bulwark of our liberty and the backbone of our
democracy.

Less than 5 per cent of the people who ever lived in this world
have enjoyed freedom. Today less than 25 per cent of the people
of the world enjoy anything approaching the liberty which is
our birthright under American citizenship.

No greater menace to that liberty and our democracy could
arise than the transfer of the control of our public schools to the
national government in Washington.

Can we now doubt that if the federal government appropriates
money for our public schools the federal government will control
them?
In view of the record of the present administration in Washington, no one can feel confident that it will not use federal subsidy of education as a political weapon. Can an administration which has already sought openly to bend and twist the Constitution to give the national government control over ballot boxes, over police power, and over local business, be trusted to renounce control over the education of the youth of the nation, once it has established the principle of contributing federal money toward such education?

Within a generation, the principle of federal control of education would be an accepted fact.

One deplorable result of federal subsidy is the tendency to decrease the feeling of local pride and responsibility which has been the secret of our good schools. The local school inspires more pride and interest on the part of the average citizen than any other institution, except the home and the church.

The attitude and tendencies of the present administration in Washington give cogent evidence that restrictions could be, and would be, placed on federal education funds—restrictions which South Carolina would be unable to accept or legally comply with under our State Constitution.

The primary policy of the administration demagogues has been to eliminate the South's historic custom of separating the races.

The most startling example of this policy was the recent refusal of the administration to extend housing funds to areas in which separation of the races is practiced. The application of Charlotte, North Carolina, for a housing development was refused on the ground that the housing would be restricted to Negroes, despite the admitted need for such housing.

This action was taken by the administration in spite of the fact that the Congress had declined to place any such restriction on the distribution of housing funds.

Another example is found in the recent action of the Department of Justice in the matter of the Henderson case to be taken up by the Supreme Court during April. The Henderson case involves separate seating in railroad dining cars, a practice approved by the Interstate Commerce Commission. This Commission asked the Department of Justice to intervene in an
effort to have the case dismissed. Solicitor General Perlman not only refused to assist the Interstate Commerce Commission, but he actually filed a brief in favor of Elmer Henderson, the complainant, opposing separate seating in railroad dining cars.

It is perfectly clear that the Department of Justice would use the full weight of that Department to make certain that no federal aid for education would be extended to schools which separate the races.

The so-called safeguards of the federal aid bill now under discussion do not and cannot guarantee local control. There are three ways in which these safeguards can be circumvented. Any one of these three would be enough to render the safeguards null and void.

The first of these is the familiar Congressional device of amendment, commonly called “rider.” As you know, the federal aid bill pending in Congress, which we are now discussing, is merely an “authorization bill.” The money to finance the program must be provided for in a separate appropriation bill. When the appropriation bill is written, it will be possible to attach a “rider” thereto which can limit distribution of the appropriated funds. A “rider” providing that federal funds shall not be allotted to any State practicing separation of the races is certain to be offered, and unquestionably would be adopted.

The second way in which legislative guaranty of local control can be circumvented is by the action of another Congress. One Congress cannot bind another, and action by the next Congress or any future Congress would supersede the action of a previous Congress.

The present federal subsidy bill is merely a foot-in-the-door technique. It is only temporary. Its proponents know very well that, once they have established federal aid for education, the next Congress can come along and insert provisions giving Washington the right to regulate our schools or place conditions on the funds that will make it legally impossible for South Carolina to receive them.

The third way in which local control of schools may be nullified is by administrative fiat. The administration may arbitrarily refuse to give federal funds to schools which separate the races,
in defiance of the views of Congress. We have seen this happen in the distribution of housing funds.

The dangers of federal aid for education are clearly expressed by those in a position in Washington to know. Eminent among these is Honorable Sam Rayburn, of Texas, the Speaker of the National House of Representatives. Mr. Rayburn opposes federal aid for education. He opposes it on the ground that, under it, federal control of the schools is inevitable.

I have a copy of a letter written by Mr. Rayburn on this subject a few weeks ago. Let me read you what this distinguished Texan, who has been in Congress for 37 years, has to say on the subject of federal aid.

Mr. Rayburn said: "I am now, and have been, opposed to federal aid for education . . . Once you start giving federal funds, you get federal control, too, in the long run . . . I know that the Federal Government contributes money to few things that it doesn't ultimately run, in its entirety, or is in a position to do so, when it so desires. I can imagine our voting money, in hundreds of millions, then somebody get up and offer an amendment providing that no part of these funds be used in any state where there is segregation in the schools among the races. If a Roll Call was had on that, it would certainly carry—then we would be paying for something we weren't getting."

An argument made in favor of federal aid for education is that under federal court decisions we shall have to equalize school facilities, and that we cannot do this without accepting federal funds for local school purposes.

Those making this argument evidently assume that we will get federal money to help us continue racial separation in our schools. Everyone should know that this is directly contrary to present federal policy. Everyone who looks at the matter realistically is fully aware that as soon as we become so dependent on federal funds that we cannot do without them, the federal administrators will deny such funds to states which have separate schools for the races. We in South Carolina will then be faced with the necessity either of throwing our school children together in the same school, or doing the best we can without federal aid after having become dependent on it. The ultimate result is that we would be paying taxes for something
we are not getting. We will contribute our share, but our schools will not get the benefit of the federal funds.

The other leading argument in favor of federal aid for schools is that we are already accepting federal aid for such programs as vocational education, agricultural education, and the like, without unreasonable federal control.

This is false reasoning. The proposed federal aid bill is something entirely new. For the first time in history, it is proposed to extend federal subsidy down to the level of our elementary schools and the very roots of our educational system. This would affect our children from the very first day they enter school, in every classroom and in every book they study. There is a vast difference between federal aid for certain specialized programs, and federal aid throughout the entire public school system.

We have accepted federal aid for vocational and agricultural education, and a certain amount of supervision, because to do so has not affected our basic educational program. The temptation to regiment a nation through its children is certainly not present in such specialized fields.

We can continue to accept such special assistance only so long as objectionable restrictions are not placed upon it, and today we have plenty of cause to wonder just how long it will be before such restrictions are put into effect.

We can never accept the slightest degree of federal control over our public school system if we hope to remain free citizens in a free republic.

Seeing then, the unavoidable dangers of inviting federal subsidy of our schools, we must seek and find another solution to the educational problems now pressing upon us.

The job ahead is going to be an exacting one, and new financial resources will be necessary. There are at least three ways in which we can do that job without federal aid: first, we can demand that the Federal Government return to the States and localities the tax sources which rightfully belong to them; second, we can demand greater economy in the Federal Government, which will leave more money in the state for educational purposes; and third, we can continue to push our industrial development program to increase our income, and thereby our
ability to pay for education. The best source of revenue will be an adjustment in the spheres of taxation which will clearly define the fields of taxation rightly belonging to federal, state, and local governments. We have permitted our various areas of taxation to become confused, and the Federal Government has gradually usurped practically all tax sources including those which should belong to the states and localities. Our tax system is today a hodge-podge of overlapping, duplication, and injustices.

Unless the usurpation of tax fields by the Federal Government is checked, it will inevitably turn our states and cities into mere subdivisions, or departments, of the central government. On the other hand, if the states are given back the fields of taxation that are rightly theirs, and the revenue sources which belong to them, they can do their educational job without federal assistance, and do it better and cheaper than the federal government. There is terrific wear and tear on a tax dollar which goes first to Washington and then comes back in the form of Federal aid.

An equally important way in which we can have more money for schools is by demanding greater economy in the operation of the Federal Government. Experts have said that a financial saving amounting to billions can be brought about without affecting existing programs. A saving of from three to five billions of dollars a year could be saved simply through a more sensible and efficient federal organization, without eliminating any present functions.

The taxable income left in South Carolina by such a saving would be tremendous. South Carolina’s per-capita share of a three-billion-dollar annual saving would be $40,000,000—considerably more than we now spend for public education, and three times greater than the $13,000,000 which it is claimed we would get from federal aid to schools.

The best way Uncle Sam can help South Carolina is by cutting down his expenses, not increasing them. It is a strange sight indeed, to witness a Federal Government already burdened with 260 billion dollars in debts, proposing to extend financial aid to states whose budgets are without exception in a sounder position than its own.
The standing debt of all the 48 states, added together, is about $2.5 billion dollars. Thus the debt of the Federal Government is already 100 times greater than that of all the states put together.

Yet some people are asking Uncle Sam to go further into debt in order to help all of the States in the Union, including our own State of South Carolina, which owes not a dime in the world not covered by cash on hand or self-liquidating bonds.

The low income of the southern states handicapped them in the past in supporting their schools to the extent that other states have. The picture, however, is rapidly changing. In 1940 the 16 richest states had 46% more income than the 16 poorest states. In 1947, those 16 richest states had only 14% more income than the 16 poorest. All indications are that this differential between the South and other states will continue to be cut down.

Our greatest hope for additional support for our schools is South Carolina’s amazing economic development during the last few years. Our State today is in an era of economic growth such as we have never known before. Our per capita income is rising steadily. Our industrial potential is expanding faster than that of any state in the nation. Our agricultural might is growing, and most recently in the livestock field.

As a result of this economic development, our ability to pay for education is steadily increasing. The day is not too distant when our growing wealth will permit a vastly improved public school program. We are already doing a far better job than we did a few years back. Our expenditures for public schools have more than tripled in the past three years. A survey by the Council of State Governments shows that South Carolina was the second highest state in the nation in the percentage by which we increased our expenditures for education in 1948, as compared with 1938. Our increase was 41% higher than the national average.

We are already improving our school program, and the control of that program should be retained in our communities and in the state, where our taxes can be made to yield their maximum returns. Will we gain by sending our educational dollars to Washington, to be put through the Federal shrinking machine?
We have more to gain by encouraging the sense of local pride and responsibility which makes better schools, and by emphasizing the higher values of moral purpose, character, and responsible citizenship which our democracy needs.

I want to repeat to you what I told the General Assembly this year:

"Let us resolve to provide whatever is necessary to educate our children through the marshalling of our State resources behind our public school system, and keep that system free from Federal regimentation and the intermeddling of Federal bureaucrats."

Schools that are close to the people will guarantee that our government will remain close to the people. We cannot afford to take any step which will lessen the citizen's responsibility for the education of his children, or which will undermine the position of our schools as strongholds of self-government and guardians of our freedom.

Remembering that our children will be what they are taught to be, let us put our own shoulders to the wheel, with the determination that our schools can be, and will be, greater instruments of service to our people. Let us rededicate ourselves to the well-being of our schools, and go forward together in self-respect and self-reliance, with new confidence in our own ability to manage our own affairs.