PROMOTING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY:
A PILOT INVENTORY OF EDUCATION-RELATED FEDERAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Before we present our preliminary findings, it is useful to note that the fact that the seven-agency pilot inventory contains 363 programs is by itself a finding. Even if we excluded all the 2008 programs we highlighted whose inclusion is debatable, as well as the programs on the chopping block for 2009, that number would not diminish appreciably. Further, even allowing for the fact that the pilot includes programs in the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, the two main agencies in which federal education-related programs are housed, 363 is still a sizable number.

We do not mean to suggest in any way that having a large number of federal programs is a problem in and of itself. Clearly, significant needs are now being addressed that were neglected in the past. The question is, how are they being addressed and with what impact on the capacity of practitioners who deliver those services to children and their families to do so coherently and effectively?

A few years ago, Gardner updated his 1989 article, “Failure by Fragmentation.” Its focus, like the original article, was on the local level, and its title was “Still Fragmented, After All These Years.”

Even in its pilot state, our inventory reveals that the fragmented nature of education-related federal policymaking and programs is a key cause of this ongoing lament.

Findings

The good news is that federal programs cover just about every key aspect of youngsters’ education development. The bad news is that they do not reflect or promote a rational and comprehensive approach to the federal interest in achieving successful adult outcomes for children. With the necessarily repeated proviso that any summary numbers presented here only describe general tendencies among seven agencies and must therefore be treated with great caution, we present preliminary findings and observations below.

Overarching Findings

- Some programs’ purposes are so broad and diffuse that it is difficult to characterize them. At this stage of the inventory, this is especially, though by no means predominantly, characteristic of one agency. Grab-bag programs can promote flexibility, but they may also foster the pursuit of an ever-shifting array of “reforms du jour.”

• The majority of programs appear to be focused more on intervention than on prevention of any given problem.

• Using even a generous standard for classifying programs under the category of Comprehensive/Coordinated netted only 84 such programs.

• There is little demonstration of a continuum of care across programs. Although the frequently overlapping age or education-level groupings of most programs would seem to indicate a continuum or alignment of services, the program descriptions do not support this inference. Moreover, few programs make any provision for issues related to transitioning out of one kind of service or level of schooling to another.

• Most programs provide benefits for children through families. The 176 programs that involve children from 0-18 (‘all’ in the Child Age/Education Level heading of the inventory) are typically ones that provide their benefits or services to children indirectly, through their families.

• In keeping with the federal role in equity, the target or emphasis of the great majority (139) of included programs is poor children or their families. The next greatest number of programs (72) do not restrict their benefits/services (General), followed by 71 programs targeted on Special Risks, 22 focused on Disability and 17 targeted by Race and/or Ethnicity. There are 10 or fewer programs in each of the other Child Target Population categories, respectively. We repeat the warning not to confuse number of programs with relative federal spending levels. While there is good justification for each of these targets, it is also easy to see that many of these “categories” of children overlap considerably. We also know that this does not necessarily mean that children who fall into one or more of the relevant categories are receiving all the relevant services. Indeed, we know from research, not to mention the often great difference between the funding level of a given program relative to the number of youngsters eligible for that program, that most programs fall well short of serving all eligible children. Federal programs and their targeted populations may have proliferated, but funds are thinly spread among most programs.
Not including each legislative chamber’s Appropriations committee, the federal laws that originated the programs in the inventory are under the jurisdiction of a total of seven Senate committees and eight House committees, combined in 13 different ways. Time did not permit us to unearth the House and Senate authorizing committees for one-third of the included programs, so we cannot say at this point if this web of congressional jurisdictions is even more intricate. And, of course, our missing subcommittee information is also necessary to complete the picture.

Agency Findings

The Department of Health and Human Services had the greatest number of relevant programs (140), which is not surprising, given its multiple purposes, followed by the Department of Education (114). The Departments of Housing and Urban Development (38), Agriculture (34), and Justice (28) accounted for the great majority of remaining programs, and the others were distributed between the National Science Foundation (7) and the Corporation for National and Community Service (2).

There appears to be an obvious rationale for where most of these programs are housed. However, many of the programs across diverse agencies are targeted on the same or closely related problem. The great variation in how they define that problem, in their requirements and in how they direct their funds, is likely one of the major reasons why we are both duplicating services for children and their families, failing to serve them altogether or putting them in a bind about which service they receive; it certainly helps to explain the piecemeal or fragmented nature of many services.

A handful of programs are coordinated across two or more agencies, and we uncovered a few more in the agencies that we surveyed that are not yet part of the pilot inventory. It would be useful to examine how these agencies work together and particularly interesting to examine how the programs they coordinate “trickle down” to the state and local levels compared to a similar set of separately administered ones.

In most cases, there is an obvious or semi-obvious fit between a program and the specialized office in which it is administered within a given agency. Yet often, programs
with similar or overlapping purposes and services are administered by different offices. Although our project did not include uncovering program coordination mechanisms within agencies, neither the research nor our experience suggests that they are routine. Fragmentation is apparent within, as well as across, agencies.

**Program Focus Findings**

- **Relatively few programs** (23) **focus exclusively or primarily on the early care/education of very young children, and relatively few of these are directly focused on learning.**

  Those that are, however, typically also encompass one or more indirect influences on learning, such as parent involvement or children’s health, an approach whose effectiveness is unanimously supported by research.

- **The majority of programs represent indirect influences on children’s learning** – by which we mean that they do not involve academic instruction – followed closely by Ed and/or Training programs. However, while there are 81 programs focused solely or primarily on Ed and/or Training, the 96 programs whose sole or primary focus falls into the former category are distributed among a variety of program types: Nutrition (18); Health (65); Mental Health/Socioemotional Development (9); and Counseling/Mentoring (4). Another 52 programs are unevenly divided between the Drugs and/or Alcohol and Violence/Safety categories. (Numbers do not add up to 363 in either the “simple” or “complete” chunking analysis because of the nature of those analyses, which is explained more fully on the inventory tab labeled Sheet Name and Sheet Description.) As our collapsing together of programs focused exclusively or primarily on Drugs and/or Alcohol or Violence/Safety suggests – and as is evident by looking at how similar some of the program categories we had to use are – the boundaries among some types of programs represent more a difference in degree than in kind.

- **Considering only formal school-age programs, we found only a literal handful of programs exclusively or primarily focused on after-school activities** (Ed and/or Training, Extension). Using a more generous standard brought the total to 12. Looking for any type of program that also had some after-school or summer component revealed 20 such programs.

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