

Reagan Proposes A "Maybe" For Handicapped

By Marian Wright
Edelman

There's a new euphemism in Washington called flexibility. President Reagan wants to abolish the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and give the states and school districts more "flexibility." The right of handicapped children to a "free, appropriate public education" as stated in the law would be wiped off the books. School districts could still use federal dollars for special education, but they no longer would be required to spend a cent for this purpose. They would get block grants (a combination of federal funds from different programs) instead, to use for educating the disadvantaged, the handicapped, or for any of several other education programs. Once combined, funds for all these programs would be cut by 25 per cent.

The theory behind the block grants is that the states and school districts will do a better job of administering the funds because of their greater knowledge of local needs. Even with fewer federal funds, the theory goes, the

states will responsibly serve all who need help, while saving money and improving efficiency.

Will it work? Maybe. But I can't help remembering what life was like for handicapped children fewer than ten years ago, when the states had the "flexibility" President Reagan wants to revive.

I recall what it was like for one handicapped child in Mississippi before P.L. 94-142 was signed into law. Her name is Mattie T. In 1973, Mattie was twelve years old and had never been in school. She was born with cerebral palsy and for years was unable to walk, but there was nothing crippled about her mind. Though her parents were barely literate, she had taught herself to read. During the few months of tutoring she received in a Tennessee hospital while recovering from orthopedic surgery, Mattie made remarkable progress, advancing several grade levels. But the public schools refused to enroll her. They said she couldn't climb the stairs. They said she didn't belong in a classroom. They said public schools had no responsibility to educate children like her.

So until P.L. 94-142 was passed, she sat at home, lonely and bored, waiting for her brothers and sisters to return home from school.

In 1975, there were close to 2,500 children like Mattie T. who were out of school in Mississippi. But the Matties were only the tip of the iceberg. Below the tip were children like Steven, tens of thousands of them. Compared with Mattie, Steven was "lucky." He finally was allowed to attend school after being kept out for three years because of a speech problem. Once in school, his school district put him in a class for trainable mentally retarded children located across town in a metal trailer. School officials claimed he was a slow learner. His mother told us: "He had learning problems because he was excluded from school until he was nine years old. He has shown me that he can learn and he plays well with other children." When she complained, the school district gave her two choices: the metal trailer or no school for Steven at all.

In 1975, there were approximately 26,500 Stevens in Mississippi: children sitting without special help in regular

classrooms, or sitting in classes that were downright harmful to their development. Black children were especially vulnerable. They were three and one-half times as likely as white children to be placed in classes for the mentally retarded based solely on outdated I.Q. tests. Or no tests at all. James, another black child, had serious learning problems from the time he first enrolled in school. After two years in the first grade and three in the second, he was told not to return to school because he was "too retarded." No one ever bothered to evaluate James, to find out why he was having trouble learning.

But, I hear people saying, Mississippi is only one state. Aren't other states more progressive and likely to do a better job of educating handicapped children? Won't they find a way, even now, with fewer federal restrictions, and more flexibility, to carry out the intent of P.L. 94-142? Maybe. But I know a woman who works on behalf of handicapped children in Minnesota. And even in her own, relatively progressive state, she has her doubts.



Award
Returned

Ms. Teresa Carpenter (right) of the *Village Voice* is all smiles April 15 after learning she's been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. The prize was originally awarded to *Washington Post* reporter Ms. Janet Cooke (left, undated photo), who returned the award and resigned her position at the *Post*, after admitting her prize-winning story about an eight-year-old heroin junkie was not based on fact. UPI

Employment Security Commission May Lose 400 Positions With Cuts

The North Carolina Employment Security Commission may lose more than 400 positions and be forced to close many of its offices across the state if Congress approves budgetary cuts proposed by the Reagan Administration for Fiscal Year 1982.

ESC Chairman J.B. Archer, in a letter to all commission employees last week, said the U.S. Senate-approved cuts would mean a loss of approximately \$5 million in federal funding to the North Carolina agency, which currently operates ninety Job Service offices and employs more than 2,600 people. ESC is completely federally funded and receives no state monies for its operations.

"If the cuts are sustained by Congress, it will mean a reduction of approximately 220 positions in the agency and the great possibility that we will have to close most of our branch offices and even some of our full service local offices," he said in the letter. "Other budget cut proposals relating to CETA, if sustained, could require ESC to eliminate approximately 200 CETA-funded positions by September 30, 1981."

Archer said the cuts represent a 17.3 per cent reduction in Employment Service Grants-to-States funding and three per cent reduction in funding for the unemployment insurance program.

Archer's staff is conducting a cost-effectiveness study on each of the 35 branch offices and the 55 local offices that the agency operates to determine which ones may need to be closed if the budget cuts are sustained.

"In some cases, it may cost us more to close a branch office than to leave it open," he said. "A number of factors will be taken into consideration before any final decisions are made about office closings."

Archer said the employment service function of the commission, more popularly known as Job Service, is not the typical federally-funded program. Unlike many other federal programs which have significantly expanded over the past decade, the nationwide staffing of Job Service during the past sixteen years has remained constant each year while the labor force has grown approximately 42 per cent.

"The employment service in many parts of our state is the only labor market mediator available to either employers or workers," Archer said. "It's a free labor exchange where workers can find jobs and employers can find workers." With unemployment running about one per cent above last year and projections that it will become worse

in the months ahead, we need to be fully staffed to help the unemployed find jobs."

The biggest impact of the proposed cuts to ESC will be felt in the field where employers, job seekers and the unemployed are serviced, he said. He urged employees to cut corners on spending, save on energy, reduce long-distance telephone calls and travel where possible.

He said he would be meeting with members of the North Carolina Congressional delegation during the next few weeks to spell out the severity of the impact of the proposed cuts on the states.

Archer said he felt some budgetary cuts were "inevitable" because of the conservative mood of Congress. Therefore, he told the employees, he was asking his staff to prepare "a number of options for us to handle any cuts we might have to bear." He urged those who were planning to retire or leave ESC service in the coming months to advise their supervisors.

He said his staff was preparing a policy to handle any reduction in force "which will be fair and equitable to all personnel and the agency should have to take such action." He said he hoped attrition would take care of a large percentage of any personnel reductions if the budgetary cuts go through.

"The last people I want to see unemployed are our own personnel, and we will do everything possible to place in other jobs those whose positions are affected by any budget cuts," he said in the letter.

Archer said the commission is "a proud agency and is experienced in handling challenges." He said ESC's employees were hard-working and loyal and he said he felt they would "still maintain a high level of service to the public and be proud of their work" despite any personnel cutbacks and tightening of funds.

In another letter to all the Tar Heel Congressional members, Archer said the cutback in funding for the employment services operations will come at a time of growing unemployment when "we can least afford it if we are going to try to help keep North Carolinians at work and cut down on the time a person must spend on unemployment."

"An adequately staffed Job Service system is essential to meet the needs of new and expanding industries," he told the congressmen. "The proposed Job Service budget cuts will seriously impair our ability to provide labor market information, counseling and testing services, and perform basic recruitment and referral functions for new and expanding industries in

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