

Education Bill May Be Too Hot for Senate Republicans

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

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WASHINGTON - Education is a hot issue in public opinion polls and the presidential campaign. And for Senate Republicans, that may mean it's too hot to handle.

The Senate is a week into debate on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, the biggest piece of education legislation of the year. It's a made-for-the-camera opportunity for the two parties to tout their education plans before the fall elections. But Republicans are divided even among themselves over the highly partisan bill, which was written by GOP conservatives.

Democrats are itching to offer a gun-control amendment, which would force Republicans into a debate they have been avoiding for a year. President Clinton has said he will veto the bill in any event because it leaves out such crowd pleasers as his program to reduce class size.

All that is making the education bill look like more trouble than it may be worth to the Republicans, except as a political issue. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, pressed by Democratic Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy for a promise that Mr. Lott would continue the education debate this week, offered only a tepid response: "That is my hope and intent."

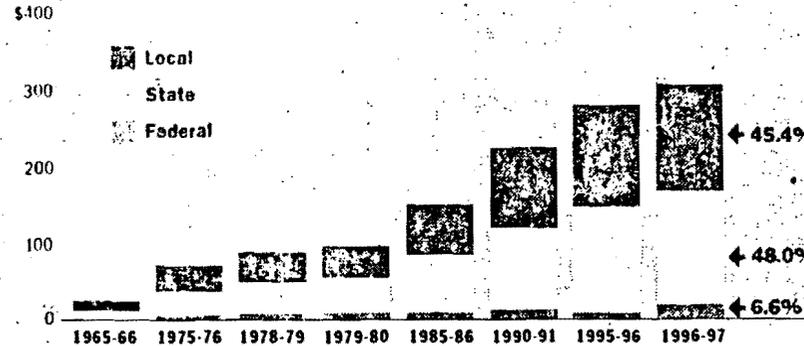
ESEA is the federal government's major commitment to education—a Great Society-era law that now funnels about \$15 billion a year to the schools, with about half of that going to low-income kids through the act's so-called Title I provisions. In the past, the five year reauthorizations have generated much debate followed by bipartisan agreement at the end. But education's high profile this election year has ended the continuity.

"Education has been a victim of its own success," says Joel Packer, a lobbyist for the National Education Association. "Both parties want to have credit for education."

The clash began this spring when GOP conservatives drafted an education bill that outraged Senate Education Committee Democrats, who unanimously opposed

Money for School

Federal educational spending peaked in 1978-79 and 1979-80 at 9.8%. Chart shows where public schools get their money for selected years, in billions of dollars.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

it. But the bill also riled GOP moderates, including Vermont Sen. Jim Jeffords, who is chairman of the Education Committee but abstained from voting on some of the bill's important measures.

The most contentious of those would change the way Title I money is distributed. Instead of going to schools with high enrollments of poor children as it does now, the money would be "attached" to the poor children, and would follow them to the school of their choice. Republicans call the idea "portability" and argue that the low-performing schools that many poor youngsters attend would be forced to improve under their plan. Otherwise, they would face losing students and the money they bring with them. But Democrats see the measure as akin to vouchers, and contend that Title I money would be diverted from needy schools and end up in middle-class neighborhoods.

Equally divisive is a measure that would send more federal funds to some states in the form of block grants. That's a perennial favorite among Republicans, who have been eager in recent years to court voters by budgeting more money for education, but who want the states and

school districts to decide how to spend it. Democrats counter that the low-income children that ESEA is supposed to help would be ignored if states could spend federal education dollars as they choose.

Block grants and vouchers would have been enough to assure congressional opposition and a presidential veto anyway, says a Democratic staffer. But the Democrats also are irate that the education bill doesn't contain any of their favorite programs. Those include the president's plan to cut class size by helping the states hire an additional 100,000 teachers; money to help districts build and renovate schools and pay for after-school programs; and an accountability plan that would withhold some funds from schools that don't meet student-performance standards.

With such wildly opposed visions, the

parties are disinclined to compromise so near to the election. Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman and other moderate Democrats came up with a plan to increase education spending by \$35 billion over five years (which they calculated would appeal to Democrats), but loosen government control over how the money is spent (which would entice Republicans). The measure won only 13 votes, 10 from its sponsors.

Republican control of the Senate means the GOP bill is certain to pass if it comes to a vote, but Democratic opposition is so intense that it may never come to that. For one thing, Democrats want to offer a gun-control amendment under the ESEA provision that involves the government in school safety—a plan that Republicans are calling a poison pill. The amendment, which requires gun locks and background checks for sales at gun shows, is the duplicate of a gun-safety amendment to a juvenile-justice bill that passed the Senate last year, with Vice President Al Gore casting the tie-breaking vote.

The House failed to pass a similar measure, though, and Republicans have avoided the gun issue ever since by not scheduling meetings to resolve differences between the House and Senate bills. With images of Columbine High School and the Million Mom March for gun safety fresh in voters' minds, the GOP is even less eager to see the gun issue surface now. "We are desperate not to have this debate become a gun fight," says a GOP staffer, who predicts Sen. Lott will pull the education bill from Senate consideration if it looks like that might happen.

For another thing, with President Clinton vowing to veto the bill anyway, Republicans may decide they can get an education plan even more to their liking in a potential George W. Bush administration.

*Educ -
ESEA debate*

Fighter Plane Faces Doubts As Rifts Grow

By GREG JAFFE
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The coalition of military services behind the Joint Strike Fighter attack plane is showing signs of cracking, raising questions about the long-term viability of the high-price program.

Senior Navy officials, who are putting together the service's five-year projected budget due out later this month, initially wanted to take about \$2 billion out of the program to help fund the service's shipbuilding program.



William Cohen

Following a strong warning from the office of Defense Secretary William Cohen last week, the Navy scaled back its cuts. Its current plans are to pull about \$1 billion from the program from 2002 to 2007, officials said.

The Joint Strike Fighter, which is still in relatively early stages of development, is expected to cost \$220 billion during the next several decades. The Department of Defense was expected to contribute about \$15 billion during the next five years. "I don't think the Navy's debate [on funding]

has ended," said a defense official who has been following the internal controversy closely. "They are still trying to figure it out."

Even a reduction of \$1 billion in the Navy's commitment to the Joint Strike Fighter could have a significant impact on the program, which is also being supported by the Air Force and the Marine Corps.

A senior Air Force official said if the Navy pulls its support, causing the cost of the Joint Strike Fighter to the other services to rise, the Air Force could scale back its commitment as well.

The Air Force has indicated it could purchase upgraded F-16s instead of the Joint Strike Fighter, this official said. The Air Force is worried any rise in the Joint Strike Fighter's price could eat into its other priorities, which include the F-22.

Any reduction in the program also is worrisome for Lockheed Martin Corp., Bethesda, Md., and Boeing Co., Seattle, the two companies locked in a battle for the development contract, or at least the leading role in the project. A decision on the contract is scheduled for March 2001.

Mr. Cohen's office has worked hard in recent months to maintain support for the plane among all the services. Only the Marine Corps, which says it desperately needs the attack jet to modernize its aging fleet, has given its unconditional backing.

In early May, Deputy Defense Secretary Rudy de Leon told senior Air Force and Navy leaders in a memo the Joint Strike Fighter program "is at a critical juncture" and there is "no margin for delay in producing the aircraft."

So far, Mr. Cohen, a strong proponent of the fighter jet, has been able to hold the coalition together. But there is widespread acknowledgement the Pentagon can't afford each of the three fighter-jet programs currently in the Defense Department's budget. The Joint Strike Fighter is not as fully developed as the other two planes, another reason it may be vulnerable.

From the outset, the Joint Strike Fighter was supposed to represent a new model for the way the Department of Defense purchases weapons. By encouraging the Navy, Air Force and Marines to buy essentially the same plane, initial costs would be reduced. Long-term maintenance costs would also be reduced because the services could order the same parts.

While such an approach to buying fighter jets makes sense financially, it also has serious drawbacks. "It is tough for a single plane to be all things to all of the services, making it tough to keep everyone on board," said Steven Kosiak, director of budget studies for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington. "Tight budget pressures make it even tougher."