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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES:

The education of our children is vital to the future of the United States. From the start, our Founding Fathers knew that ignorance and free government could not co-exist. Our nation has acted from the beginning on the sound principle that control over our schools should remain at the State and local level. Nothing could be more destructive of the diversity of thought and opinion necessary for national progress than an excess of control by the central government.

In recent years, our national sense of fairness and equity has led to an increasing number of Federal programs of aid to education. The Federal government has recognized a responsibility to help ensure adequate educational opportunities for those with special needs, such as the educationally deprived and the handicapped. We have appropriately provided States and localities with added resources to help them improve opportunities for such students. At the same time, we have channeled our aid into too many narrow and restrictive categorical programs. As a result, we have made it more difficult for the schools to educate.

It is time that we reconcile our good intentions with the recognition that we at the Federal level cannot know what is best for every school child in every classroom in the country.

In my State of the Union address, I spoke of the need for a new realism and a new balance in our system of Federalism -- a balance that favors greater responsibility and freedom for the leaders of our State and local governments.

Our experience in education demonstrates that those principles are not abstract political philosophy, but guides to the concrete action we must take to help assure the survival of our system of free government. We must continually guard against Federal control over public schools.

I am proposing today the Financial Assistance for Elementary and Secondary Education Act which will consolidate 24 existing programs into one block grant. The focus of this block grant will be on improved educational opportunities for those with special needs -- the handicapped and educationally deprived. Federal funds will be provided with a minimum of Federal regulation and a maximum of local control. My proposal is based on the conviction that education needs can be most effectively and creatively met by allowing States greater flexibility in the use of Federal funds.

I am particularly pleased at the extent to which my proposal reflects extensive consultations with individuals, organizations representing publicly elected officials and leaders in the education community. The proposal has been

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modified and strengthened since the time of my State of the Union message as a result of suggestions we received. I am convinced it represents essential changes in our system of providing aid to education.

My proposals will consolidate programs in the following areas:

- . Elementary and Secondary Education
- . Education for the Handicapped
- . Adult Education
- . Vocational Education

To assure that students with special needs receive proper attention the proposed legislation provides that 75 percent of a State's allocation be spent on the educationally deprived and handicapped, and that vocational education programs continue to be supported. The same strong civil rights compliance procedures that exist in the programs to be consolidated are included in this legislation.

Under the proposed legislation, funds will be allocated to States based on a formula which takes into account the number of school-aged children and the number of children from low-income families. No State will receive less money than it did in Fiscal Year 1976 under the programs to be consolidated. Further, local education agencies will be assured that the funds will reach the local level, where children are taught and where control should be exercised.

Vocational education is an important part of our total education system. Here, too, my proposal seeks greater flexibility at the local level while maintaining Federal support. States would be required to spend a portion of the funds they receive on vocational education, giving special emphasis to the educationally deprived and the handicapped.

Non-public school and Indian tribal children would continue to be eligible for assistance under this proposal. Where States do not serve such children, the Commissioner of Education will arrange to provide funds directly, using the appropriate share of the State's funds.

The proposed legislation will require States to develop a plan, with public participation, for the use of Federal funds. All interested citizens, students, parents and appropriate public and private institutions will participate in the development of the plan. States will be required to develop procedures for independent monitoring of compliance with their plan. State progress will be measured against the plan, but the plan itself will not be subject to Federal approval.

For Fiscal Year 1977 I am requesting \$3.3 billion for the education block grant. For the next three fiscal years, I am proposing authorizations of \$3.5 billion, \$3.7 billion and \$3.9 billion. For too long the real issue in our education programs --- Federal versus State and local control --- has been obscured by endless bickering over funding levels. Hopefully, with these request levels, we can focus the attention where it belongs, on reform of our education support programs.

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Enactment of this legislation will allow people at the State and local level to stop worrying about entangling Federal red tape and turn their full attention to educating our youth.

I urge prompt and favorable consideration of the Financial Assistance for Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

GERALD R. FORD

THE WHITE HOUSE,

March 1, 1976.

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