

Finding the how of learning

In the education message he delivered to Congress on March 3, President Nixon placed heavy emphasis on the need for more basic educational research. Because the learning process is still a "mystery," the President said, educators do not know why some schools are better than others, the Federal Government has been unable to develop a cohesive education policy, and: "We are not getting as much as we should out of the dollars we spend."

The solution the President came up with for this deficiency in educational research was not to recommend any large increases in Federal spending in the field. Instead, Mr. Nixon recommended taking a new approach to educational research by creating a new Federal bureau, to be called the National Institute of Education. The institute would operate out of the Office of Education, and would, said the President, "begin the serious, systematic search for new knowledge needed to make educational opportunity truly equal."

Whether, in view of the Administration's insistence on budget-trimming, the proposed institute will amount to more than a reshuffling of bureaus and programs is a real, but unanswered question. One Office of Education official, in the National Center for Educational Research and Development, suggests that, at least in the immediate future, the institute's most novel contribution will be "a new building."

The President, however, says the National Institute of Education will eventually be funded at \$250 million a year, which is a considerable cut above the \$90 million to \$100 million the Office of Education is currently spending on educational research and development. And even if the level remains low, there are obvious areas in which a Government agency exclusively devoted to educational research could have a salutary effect.

One such area, which Mr. Nixon says will fit into the National Institute of Education's mandate, is the right-to-read program announced by U.S. Commissioner of Education James E. Allen Jr. in September. The Government has invited state and local officials to apply for Federal funds to operate reading programs, but the Office of Education has been reluctant to take a stand on the controversial question of what instruction methods work best in the teaching of reading. A pilot right-to-read project to be started in San Francisco this summer by the Catholic Schools' Education Progress Center, with \$40,000 from the Office of Educa-



Office of Education
Commissioner Allen: Right to read.

tion, will not concentrate on any one system of reading instruction, but will employ different techniques and materials for each child.

"There is a controversy over the subject of teaching reading," Dr. Allen concedes. But he is steering the Office of Education away from the dispute, leaving the problem in the hands of local officials. "I don't want to become involved in that," he declares, "because I think the teacher in the local community must decide what system works best for the children in his care."

An even more basic area in which the proposed institute could lend a hand is the burgeoning field of early child development. Although the Government's best-known attempt in this field, the Head Start program, is still entangled in controversy (SN: 3/7, p. 247), the development of research in early childhood learning remains highly important to the Administration. A system of day care centers for the preschool children of working mothers is a crucial feature of the President's proposals for welfare reforms, a feature most educators endorse.

The Government already has a sizable investment in this kind of research. Last year the Office of Education spent more than \$62 million on the Regional Education Laboratories scattered throughout the country, many of which are engaged in designing early childhood learning programs. The federally backed National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois has been trying to pinpoint optimum learning environments for children ever since 1966. The research questions have by no means been exhausted, however.

"Most educators," says Dr. Sherman Ross, executive secretary of the National Research Council's Committee on Basic Research in Education, "feel that early childhood development is going to be the center of action in

education research in the coming years."

Another program to which the proposed institute could lend important assistance is the national assessment of education progress begun last year by the Education Commission of the States, a program currently financed by the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation and the Office of Education. Suggested originally in 1963 by Dr. Francis Keppel, then U.S. Commissioner of Education, the national assessment project is attempting to measure the educational attainments of people between the ages of 9 and 35 throughout the country.

Most standardized tests give only percentile scores, indicating a student's performance in a given field relative to other students. The national assessment tests are aimed rather at measuring the inherent quality of a student's knowledge. The tests administered last fall, for instance, include measures of "citizenship," in which students were graded on their understanding of public issues and their willingness to consider alternative viewpoints. A sample question for 17-year-olds was to list the arguments both for and against strict gun control laws.

This kind of test, the President said, which includes previously untested factors such as "responsibility, wit and humanity," will ultimately enable the National Institute of Education to establish standards of educational attainment more realistic than the current national norms.

Whether the National Institute of Education winds up playing a significant role in these research problems or not, centralizing the Government's efforts in educational research could be in itself a healthy step.

"The Office of Education is one of the oldest of Government bureaucracies and suffers from a hardening of the arteries," a high-ranking educational consultant to the Office of Education points out. "It was intended to be a bookkeeping agency, and research and development has not had the structural base within the office that an Institute of Education could provide."

In the long run, Dr. Ross says, the National Institute of Education can make an important contribution to educational research by attracting experts from outside the immediate field of education. The President has made it clear he wants the institute to maintain a permanent staff of scientists from disciplines like psychology, biology and the social sciences.

"Many of the new ideas about education may be coming from these other fields," Dr. Ross notes. "In this way the Office of Education can seek to broaden its base of scientific input."