

INTRODUCTION

As any multimillionaire will testify, "Making the first million is the hardest." As any educator concerned with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will readily paraphrase it, "Spending the first billion is the hardest."

The National Conference on Education of the Disadvantaged convened less than 365 days after America made its first Federal commitment—in cash—to start wiping out inequality of opportunity in the schools.

More than 400 educators, as well as professional allies and critics, gathered at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. Among them were the Title I coordinators from each of the States, a hardy group that stands in the eye of a national hurricane, weathering conflicting demands and expectations, yet upon which the Nation depends to pilot it over an uncharted sea.

Although Title I is regarded as an *action* program, it is, like early phases of the space program, a huge undertaking in *research* of the totally unknown. Perhaps one day soon a conference on education of the disadvantaged will be characterized by a competitive exchange of success stories and answers. This year's conference, first in perhaps a long series, certainly was not. It was hardly even an exchange of questions. It was a *search* for questions. At this early stage, the main question that emerged was not, How do you proceed? but, Where do you begin? If everyone agreed—as almost everyone did—that change is imperative and urgent, almost no one was sure of where change should properly start. Must change begin with the teacher, the principal, the superintendent, the school board? Do you begin in the school lunchroom by insuring a good breakfast as fuel for a healthy mind? Do you begin with parents, teaching them to read stories to the young and to spur the ambitions of the nearly grown? Do you begin with community action, trying to restore the confidence of the alienated in a society that claims to guarantee health care, police protection, a right to free choice of good housing, and equal opportunity to work for a living? Or is the question purely one of improving the skills of pedagogy? Do you begin with the mind of the child?

About half of the conference was composed of educational professionals directly engaged in planning or ad-

ministering title I projects. They numbered four from each State—usually the State Title I coordinator, a university education specialist, and two administrators or teachers directly engaged in a Title I project, one urban and one rural.

The remaining half of the conference consisted of outsiders—Government officials in education and related fields, community action specialists, civil rights leaders, and officials of major educational organizations.

At times the conference was divided, as though in debate, by a loosely definable line. Community action specialists and civil rights leaders pressed for dramatic change in the structure of schools. To them, the evidence clearly added up to a gross failure of the schools, and therefore gross change was mandatory. Some of the school people present understandably resisted this report card of blanket failure. If educational adjustments need to be made in keeping with new national expectations, they argued, experienced professionals are the most qualified to judge what adjustments are necessary and how to make them. The mammoth institution of public education, they said, cannot be uprooted overnight; old institutions are capable of producing new kinds of behavior for new needs.

When at times the words grew hot, the listening correspondingly grew more alert. It was not a debate which anyone won or lost. It was an interpenetration of ideas from diverse vantage points. It is safe to say that no conferee went home without a deeper understanding of the complexities in which he is engaged.

The spirit of the Conference was effectively keyed by Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey in a stirring address at the opening night's banquet. He called upon the delegates to help close the gap between the real and the ideal in education—"an educational system that will train, rather than chain, the human mind; that will uplift, rather than depress, the human spirit; that will illuminate, rather than obscure, the path to wisdom; that will help *every* member of society to the full use of his natural talents."

At the second night banquet, delegates were honored with a surprise visit by the President of the United States, who emphasized the high priority of the work