

# **THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL ON WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EQUITY**

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(NACWEP Executive Director, 1975-1982)**

## **Introduction**

The Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), enacted by Congress in 1974, established a Presidentially-appointed National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs (NACWEP). From 1975 to 1982 it advised Federal officials about gender equity in education; held public hearings around the United States to highlight educational needs of various groups of women and girls; and published and disseminated a wide range of reports on topics such as the educational problems of rural and minority females, sexual harassment in education, enforcement of the law banning sex discrimination in education and the treatment of women's issues within Federal education agencies. Although NACWEP was highly praised, the politically conservative members who were appointed to the Council in 1982 by President Reagan made abrupt changes in its staff and direction. During its brief subsequent existence NACWEP no longer played a constructive role in the non-governmental community devoted to educational equity for women and girls. However, an overview of its remarkable work and contributions to gender equity in education is more than a historical footnote to the continuing story of the efforts for educational equity for American women and girls.

## **The Early Years**

In 1974 Congress passed the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) to provide educational equity for women in the United States. This unexpected action came after hearings in the House of Representatives and the Senate revealed "pervasive patterns of injustice and discrimination suffered by women in American society in general and in the U.S. educational system in particular." A bill had been drafted by a small group of Washington feminists and introduced by Rep. Patsy Mink and Senator Walter Mondale simply to provide a sounding board but with little expectation that it would become law. Women's groups and leaders from across the country testified about "discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes and assumptions...that...are reinforced in their educational experience" at every level. Their testimony convinced Congress of "...the need to stimulate new public policies and programs to attempt to attain for women and girls the same opportunities which are available to their brothers, and it passed the Act whose stated purpose is to provide educational equity for women in the United States.

The WEEA program awarded grants and contracts to public agencies, non-profit organizations and individuals for projects designed to contribute to educational equity for girls and women from preschool through adult levels. Under an authorization of \$30 million, \$6.2 million was appropriated for fiscal year 1976. The program was administered by a Women's Program Staff in the Office of Education under Joan Duval.

WEEA also established an Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs (later the National Advisory Council--NACWEP) to advise the Commissioner of Education on administration of the Act and its funds and to make recommendations to the Assistant Secretary for Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW) concerning improvement of educational equity for women generally. The Council was composed of 20

members, 17 appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, who were to be "...broadly representative of the general public [and] by virtue of their knowledge or experience,...versed in the role and status of women in American society." Additionally, the Chairman of the Civil Rights Commission, the Director of the Labor Department's Women's Bureau, and the Director of the Women's Action Program of DHEW were ex officio members. Proponents of the Act had successfully included provisions for Senate confirmation of members and for the Council to elect its own Chairman (sic) because they mistrusted the Republican Administration's appointees if unchecked by the Democratic Senate.

The initial Council members, with staggered terms commencing May 9, 1975, included four men (one of whom, Ernest Boyer, resigned when he became Commissioner of Education), a State Commissioner of Education, several executives of institutions of higher education, Native American, Hispanic and black representatives, a student and a range of occupations and interests. They came from all parts of the country. Two--Holly Knox, director of the Project on Equal Education Rights of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, and Dr. Bernice R.Sandler, director of the Project on the Status and Education of Women at the Association of American Colleges--were professionals in the field of educational equity for girls and women. In 1975 the Council met three times. At the first meeting in June, Sandler was elected Chair; at the September meeting in Washington the Council selected Joy R.Simonson as Executive Director. She was deputy director of the Federal Women's Program and had long been active in women's organizations and issues. Sandler and Simonson had participated in the small group which drafted WEEA and advocated for its passage.

NACWEP, like several other advisory councils related to the Office of Education, was attached to the Office of Education for administration but had its own budget for staff, meetings, and members' per diem honoraria. By the end of the year the Council had hired a small staff and rented a suite of offices. Staff were under civil service regulations, but classified as "excepted appointees" which meant that they did not have "tenure" or the job security of regular Federal employees.

In its first Annual Report NACWEP summarized its basic assumptions which were to shape its work as follows: the Council must concern itself with the improvement of educational equity for women in all federally-assisted programs and not be limited to the Women's Educational Equity Act; women's concerns and needs must be incorporated throughout educational programs, i.e., mainstreamed, and not left to a few specially-designated programs; the Council must always have special concern for the needs of minority women who face double discrimination.

Specific recommendations included support of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited sex discrimination in Federally-assisted programs; overcoming sex stereotyping in vocational and career education programs; improvements in WEEA, Career Education, and Civil Rights Act Title IV regulations.

Beginning with a 1975 meeting in Albuquerque, N.M. which focused on educational needs of Indian women and girls, the Council alternated its Washington meetings with others in a variety of locations to learn about problems facing various population groups. At each such session a day was devoted to hearing from community organizations, individuals and state and local educators. According to the 1976 Annual Report, "Sex discrimination, stereotyping and many aspects of inequity were brought vividly before the Council in each of these sessions, as were

innovative projects, state law enforcement programs, needs for Federal funds, special problems of minority women, and many other issues and topics. Thus the Council functions as a communications link between the officialdom which it advises and the non-government groups so vitally interested in equity for women.

Rep. Mink, the original sponsor of WEEA, wrote to congratulate the Council after its first full year. She said: "WEEA has acted as a catalyst to progressive action on the part of women throughout the country and as a focus for women's concerns. The National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs has exceeded all expectations of diligence and ingenuity and has performed a further inestimable service in reaching out to the women's community and helping to unite its various parts into a more cohesive and potent movement.

### **Advisory Council Reports**

The Council solicited information and recommendations from women and educators throughout the country. It posed broad questions covering the Federal role in legislation, demonstrations, research, training, materials development, and various special needs. The Council reported on their 1976 outreach activities, including three field hearings, testimony and written responses from 90 persons. The recommendations presented to NACWEP were summarized in three major areas: Widespread concern for improved personnel training and materials development throughout the educational system, emphasizing attitudes as well as skills and materials required to serve women and girls equitably in teaching, counseling and administration; Additional services for women with special needs (age, race, ethnicity, class or geographic origin were listed, but not, interestingly, disability or sexual orientation); Federal equity policies, programs and practices, backed up by tough enforcement.

The first special project of the Council was a report on the educational needs of rural women and girls. As the first report on this subject, it was widely quoted and disseminated. Dr. Kathryn Clarenbach of the University of Wisconsin at Madison prepared the report on the basis of four wide-ranging hearings she arranged for the Council's committee on rural women in Madison, Stockton, CA. Santa Fe, N. M., and in Appalachia at Boone, N.C., along with a review of Federal programs which impact on the rural population. The Council found a disturbing absence of data and concern for the 34 million rural women who were neglected and doubly disadvantaged in terms of educational equity. It recommended a comprehensive Federal rural education policy and data collection program. The Council recommendations were adopted as part of the 1977 Houston National Women's Conference Plan of Action.

Combining the expertise of specialists with its own outreach efforts enabled NACWEP to publish a series of reports which were broadly disseminated, at no charge, within and outside the government: "Seven Years Later" (1977) was the first Federal review of the status of women's studies programs at 15 selected institutions; it was prepared by Florence Howe, a pioneer in the women's studies movement. The Unenforced Law: Title IX Activity by Federal Agencies Other Than HEWS (1978) was the first examination of 20 agencies and Title IX. It found almost total neglect or ignorance of their obligations under this key anti-discrimination statute. "Neglected Women: The Educational Needs of Displaced Homemakers, Single Mothers and Older Women" (1978), based on extensive hearings at five community colleges, highlighted enormous obstacles facing these groups as they chose or were forced to seek employment. The report included numerous recommendations for legislation and policies intended to meet these women's needs

for educational, vocational and financial assistance. The concept of displaced homemaker evolved in this period and the Council's report was released at the organizing conference of the Displaced Homemakers Network.

**Working Women Speak: Education, Training, Counseling Needs (1979)** resulted from cooperation with the nongovernmental National Commission on Working Women and focused on the 80% of working women in blue and pink collar jobs.

**Increasing Sex Equity: The Impact of the 1976 Vocational Education Amendments on Sex Equity in Education (1980)** followed extensive Council work on the law and regulations and was prepared jointly with the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education. The two Councils held forums to stimulate interest in the subject in preparation for reauthorization of the law.

**A Symposium on the Socialization of Black Women** was held at Texas Southern University in 1980 and the papers and recommendations were published.

**Sexual Harassment: A Report on the Sexual Harassment of Students (1980)** reported on extensive anecdotal responses to a Council call for information about experiences of postsecondary students. This was the first Federal report on the subject. It concluded that sexual harassment was not only illegal but a serious problem requiring action by academic institutions and government.

**Title IX: The Half Full, Half Empty Glass (1981)** was a review of changes after nine years of Title IX. It reported on significant progress for women and girls in programs and activities, student services and financial aid, admissions, educational employment, athletics; but it also underscored areas in which females remained seriously disadvantaged. The report received nationwide media attention. It included a listing of organizations active in educational equity as well as a useful bibliography. As the first Federal evaluation of Title IX, it received considerable attention and proved useful during the 25th Anniversary events in 1997.

Under its mandate to advise the Assistant Secretary for Education, NACWEP also issued a series of five reports assessing the treatment and status of women within the Education Division of HEW. They covered women's participation in management and policy development, sex fairness in the use of funds, the impact of Education Division programs, sex bias in education legislation and regulations, and sex fairness in communications, products, and dissemination strategies of the National Institute of Education, the Office of Education and other components of the Division. Some of these issues were first addressed in these reports. After the establishment of the Department of Education the Council continued to monitor, assess and make recommendations about many aspects of mainstreaming educational equity.

### **The Council and the WEEA Program**

Throughout its existence, NACWEP had special responsibilities in relation to the Women's Educational Equity Act Program itself. Continuing recommendations by the Council concerning regulations and administration of the program led to changes such as simplified language, technical assistance and training for grantees, better communications and outreach, and priorities and criteria for project selection. The Council testified on behalf of increased appropriations for the program and was deeply involved in Congressional crafting of the reauthorization of WEEA in 1978. The revised law added a second level of grants for projects to assist state and local

school districts to implement Title IX. It also expanded the Council's mandate to include advising the Secretary of HEW (including the Office for Civil Rights).

The Council visited dozens of WEEA projects to facilitate its annual evaluations of the program. It published a pamphlet entitled "What's WEEA?" in order to publicize and humanize the little-known Federal program. It highlighted four WEEA grant projects, including details and quotations intended to whet appetites for more information. The report said: "The Council believes that the WEEA Program is accomplishing great things for women, and we want to let the public know it.....[W]e have been convinced that a Federal program can make a difference."

In 1977 the Commissioner of Education recommended termination or merger of all but two advisory councils, one of them being NACWEP. He wrote to the Secretary of HEW, who concurred with his recommendation: "I propose that the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs be continued without change. Without question this is one of the most productive and far-reaching councils in the Office of Education....In every area the Council has entered -- regulations, legislation, policy issues, surveys, and so on -- it has made its impact upon the policy makers in a profound manner....[W]ere this Council not in existence, it ought to be."

### **Politics Comes to NACWEP**

The initial members of the Council were appointed by President Ford; as their terms expired, replacements were appointed by President Carter. But partisan politics were not a factor in the selection of the diverse membership until 1982. By that time all except the ex officio members were serving in expired terms, so the Reagan administration appointed a full slate of 17 members in the spring of that year. The executive director, after communicating with them, arranged for their first meeting on July 19, including a swearing-in ceremony by the Secretary of Education and a full two-day agenda and orientation.

Immediately upon convening in the Council office, a member moved to change the agenda in order to consider personnel as the first order of business. She thereupon moved to dismiss Joy Simonson as executive director immediately. After a brief discussion (having removed appeal rights from the personnel procedures) and an unprecedented roll call vote, the Council voted 14 to 3 to terminate Simonson's employment effective in two weeks but with her control of the Council's work to cease at once.

A search committee was appointed to consider possible replacements. One applicant had appeared at the office prior to the Council vote; several others from various places were sent over by the White House that afternoon. Next morning the committee recommended --and the Council voted for-- appointment of Rosemary Thomson from Morton, Illinois near Peoria. Described in the local press as a "conservative activist", she was the state director of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. A substitute teacher, her sole activity relating to WEEA had been her Congressional testimony against the WEEA appropriation. (The Reagan administration proposed zero funding for the program for fiscal year 1983, but Congress appropriated \$5,760,000).

Considerable publicity about the abrupt Council actions ensued in both the general and education press. Feminist leaders and equity advocates complained about obvious political interference in what had been an independent, non-political Council. Rep. Barney Frank (D., Ma.) organized a

Special Order on the floor of the House of Representatives and was joined by several other members in praising Simonson and deploring the "politicization" of NACWEP.

Within a month, White House staffer Wendy Borchardt, who had orchestrated the Council action and supplied the candidates, was dismissed by Elizabeth Dole, President Reagan's assistant for public liaison. After 18 months as executive director, Thomson resigned, reportedly under pressure from the Council. No public information was available concerning a successor or work by the Council. Within a year Congress terminated a group of Education Department advisory councils, including the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs.

### **Conclusion**

Functioning during years of widely expanding awareness and concern for the special needs faced by girls and women throughout their educational experiences, the Advisory Council played a significant role. Through its public hearings around the country, including small cities and some rural settings, the Council served as a two-way channel: it brought views of citizens to the Federal bureaucracy and shared with the public information about government programs designed to advance educational equity. Council members contributed expertise to Federal agencies and to Congressional committees. The Advisory Council reports focused attention in Washington, in academic circles and among community groups, on a broad range of topics and were the first to do so on a number of issues. Although concrete measurement of the Council's accomplishments is impossible, the members and staff can take satisfaction from significant contributions to educational equity for women and girls.