Women’s Equality and the National Education Association’s Interest in a U.S. Department of Education, 1910-1930

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Scholars of federalism and the gendered bases of social policy have not focused on women’s historical role in the political development of American public education. In this book chapter, I examine how the National Education Association (NEA) pressured Congress to create a U.S. Department of Education, immediately after World War I and in the wake of women’s suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution. NEA leaders and rank and file members, along with a coalition of women’s civic groups among other associations, sought to elevate education to a national policy priority and to raise the professional status of educators. Ultimately, the NEA failed to achieve its goal. Opponents of the proposed Department, including “constitutional leagues”, argued that the Department would “bring education into politics” and lead to centralized control over a policy area that was “reserved to the states.” The gendered identities and ideological conflicts that shaped the debate over the department’s creation reveal how an emerging profession sought to alter the division of policy labor across different levels of government, in order to improve the status and recognition accorded to the professionals in their line of work.

Congress has created new cabinet-level departments in the executive branch nineteen times in American history.\(^1\) After the Civil War, the National Education Association (NEA)\(^2\) pressured Congress to create a Department of Education, and hoped that the head of the Department would be a Secretary in the President’s cabinet. They succeeded in 1867, but only for a moment. Within a year, the Department was downgraded to a mere “Bureau” in the

\(^1\) There is more than one way to count how many cabinet departments Congress created in the nation’s history. To reach nineteen in this tally, Foreign Affairs which became State; War which became Defense; and the Attorney General and the Department of Justice are not double counted. Departments that covered multiple policy areas are counted once, as where separate departments that split off from them later on. Accordingly, Congress created cabinet departments in the following order: Foreign Affairs (1789; renamed State later that year), War (1789; renamed Defense in 1947), Treasury (1789), Attorney General (1789; became head of the Department of Justice created in 1870), Post Office (1792, removed from cabinet in 1971), Navy (1798; merged into Defense in 1947), Interior (1849), Agriculture (1862), Department of Justice (1870), Commerce and Labor (1903; they were split in 1913), Commerce (1913), Labor (1913), Defense (1947), Health, Education and Welfare (1953, split into Health and Human Services and Education in 1979), Housing and Urban Development (1965), Transportation (1966), Energy (1977), Health and Human Services (1979), Education (1979), Veterans Affairs (1988), and Homeland Security (2002).

\(^2\) The NEA is the nation’s oldest and largest professional organization of teachers. It was founded in 1857, and it now claims 3.2 million members. Its original members were all men, but by 1920, women had become a majority of the members, and the regularly filled leadership positions in the association.
Department of Interior, headed by a Commissioner of Education, subordinated to the Secretary of the Interior. The National Education Association, though, did not give up. They later on waged two major campaigns to create an independent Department of Education – from 1918 to 1928, which ultimately failed, and 1971 to 1979, which was successful.

Several studies which focus on the more recent campaign examine the bureaucratic turf battles waged between agencies within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), created in 1953, as political interest groups, and especially “teachers’ unions,” secured a “payoff” from President Carter, whom the unions pledged to support during his presidential campaign, if he promised to take the “E” out of HEW. These studies do not, however, recover the gendered perspectives that historically animated and mobilized the leaders and the rank and file classroom teachers of the NEA, a large majority of them women, as they lobbied for the abstract goal of altering the shape of the federal bureaucracy.

In fact, gendered perspectives that were evident during the 1970s campaign, examined in the next chapter, drew upon the legacy of the Association’s effort to create the Department during the Progressive Era. Studies of that earlier campaign also do not recover this gendered history. The most extensive focuses on one group who supported the Department, the Masons, and a large section of the American public who was opposed to it – American Catholics, who worried that an increased federal role in education would undermine the parochial school system.

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in the United States.4 That study, however, does not illuminate the arguments and beliefs of the women leaders and members within the National Education Association, who were the primary force keeping the issue before Congress during the 1920s. The rhetoric that these leaders used reveals how many in the NEA viewed creation of the Department to be an important step on the road toward women’s equality. The Department’s origins were linked to feminist movements in American history, which helped to generate the broad-based social enthusiasm that was a necessary, though insufficient condition, to bring about the reform.

Accordingly, the attempt to create the U.S. Department of Education is perhaps best understood within the context of other political developments in which women have played a central role as they sought to shape public policy in the United States. Scholars have traced women’s participation in politics prior to the 19th Amendment in civic organizations and professional associations as lobbyists, and as elected and appointed officials in agencies governing policy domains associated with “municipal housekeeping” and the “maternal” aspects of womanhood, including the domain of public education.5 Similarly, the bills before Congress to create the Education Department, and the non-partisan lobbying strategies that women employed to support them, echoed these other forms of women’s political engagement. In fact, many teachers were mobilized during the 1920s to support these bills for gendered reasons, and not only because of the recent success of the women’s suffrage amendment to the constitution. In


addition, the teaching profession believed that leveraging the power of the federal government was the best path along which the status of the American “classroom teacher” could be enhanced.

Several obstacles stood in the way of the NEA’s goal to “dignify” the work of teachers by having a Secretary with the ear of the President who could represent their voice in the federal government. One was the constitutional principle of federalism – or the idea that certain policy fields, and especially public education, are domains of the states, which should not be encroached upon by the federal government. Another was the idea that having a large and visible bureaucratic agency in the federal executive branch would “politicize” education, with the “teachers’ bloc” gaining too much influence over educational policy. In fact, the NEA was only then just emerging as a powerful lobbying force before Congress. It came to have that forceful presence in large part because of the political experiences of many of its women leaders, who had fought for “equal pay for equal work” and for women’s suffrage during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and who had pioneered women’s presence in state government as they won elective offices like the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Thus, as women in the NEA sought to make education policy a national priority, they entered a contest over the meaning of American federalism, armed with their own understanding of that constitutional principle, which in their case was shaped by gendered social status concerns, which were rooted in the female-dominated profession of which they were a part. They did not accept arguments on the other side that under the principle of federalism, a division of policy responsibility across the national, state and local governments was settled once and for all, such that some policy areas were truly national in scope, while others, including education, were “merely” the prerogative of state governments. That idea, many educators felt, demeaned
their work in the national political order, and contributed to the relatively low status of teachers in the country. In a way, that division of policy labor in the federal system reproduced a prevalent feature of the American polity, which was that economic, social and political relationships tended to overlap in ways that women tended not to occupy, to the same extent as men, positions of high economic-earning power, or of great social and political authority. The NEA’s goal to create the Department of Education was in part a reaction to such gender hierarchies, and was bound up with the desire of teachers to secure a greater standing in society, so that their prerogatives and claims were given due weight in the economic, social and public affairs of the nation.

I. The Authority and Status of Women Educators, 1909-1914

Fifty-three men founded the National Education Association in 1857. From its inception until 1909, all presidents of the Association were men. That changed in 1910, when the rank and file of classroom teachers – a supermajority of them women, replaced the nominee selected by the “Old Guard” with their own choice of Ella Flagg Young, the superintendent of Chicago schools, and the first woman in the United States to command a large urban schooling system. Flagg Young’s election was a major turning point in the relations between the sexes in the Association’s history. The next woman president was Mary C.C. Bradford, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction from Colorado, who was elected in 1917, two months after the American entrance into World War I. Among Bradford’s female successors in the 1920s were Josephine Preston Corliss, the Washington State Superintendent; Charl Ormond Williams, a suffragist and county superintendent from Tennessee; and Olive Jones, an elementary school principal from New York City. These women led the NEA from 1918 to 1926 during its

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campaigns to create the Department of Education and to provide federal aid to education, including – most importantly – federal aid to enhance teacher salaries.

As I detail below, more basic than the economic interests of teachers, however, was a set of status concerns, which for the teachers was linked to, but not fully determined by, low salaries for all teachers and a pay gap between men and women teachers. These status concerns were a function of two hierarchies: first, a gendered hierarchy between female classroom teachers and administrators within the profession, most of them men; and second, the subordinate position of the field of education policy within a national hierarchy of domestic policy fields, including natural resources, agriculture, law, commerce and labor, and the associated occupations with each of those fields, all of which commanded the attention of the federal government.

The Status of the Classroom Teacher

In a speech at the National Education Association meeting in St. Paul in 1914, Sophonisba Breckinridge, a professor of social economy at the University of Chicago, discussed the problem of the low status of women teachers within the public schools, who were 79 percent of teachers. Although “one hears much of the feminization of schools,” Breckinridge argued, one had to consider not only who does the teaching, but also “whose ideals prevail and who exercises the authority.” Fortunately, “some attempts at true feminization” had been made. For example, she noted with sarcasm how a few years earlier, the women teachers in Chicago “conceived and carried into effect the feminine idea that the great corporations should be made to meet their lawful obligations” and actually pay the taxes they owed in support of the schools. Another so-called “feminine idea” was to institute “Teachers Councils,” which were based on the

idea that it might be good “for those in authority to know what those who were doing the work were thinking.” In Breckinridge’s view, the quality of the schools was undermined by the “archaic and wasteful exclusion of women from political power,” an exclusion that was the source “of much bitterness on the part of women and the occasion of many injustices.” It was time for change.

The biggest cost in the school system was the salaries of teachers, even though these were especially low for women. Salaries became a guiding concern of the NEA only after Margaret Haley in Chicago, referred to by Breckinridge above, and Grace Strachan in New York City, led successful campaigns to raise them. In New York, Strachan’s organization, the Interborough Association of Women Teachers, fought for six years from 1906 to 1912, to secure “equal pay for equal work” – a phrase that has contemporary resonance, and that dates back to Susan B. Anthony’s Working Women’s Association in 1868 – by overturning a law that provided that female teachers should not be paid less than $600 and that male teachers should not be paid less than $900. That inequality in pay went up through the ranks: for principals, women would make $2,500, while men would make $3,500. What, Strachan asked the teachers assembled at the 1914 convention, had brought about a change to this unjust law after the pay gap had been accepted “without formal protest” for several years? The answer was that women had united across all ranks, from the kindergarten teacher to the principal to fight to change the law. In addition to improving the condition of women teachers, the new salary law also corrected the

8 Ibid., 49.
9 Ibid., 49-50.
thinking of many male teachers, who had been like “the 4 foot man on stilts who actually believes his six feet tall.”

The occasion for these speeches rallying women teachers to lean into the social, economic and administrative hierarchies that left them will low salaries and little power in the administration of the public schools was the creation that year, within the organizational structure of the NEA, of a Department of Classroom Teachers (DCT). The goal of the DCT was to empower the rank and file of the elementary teachers – more than 80 percent of them women – to develop agendas that would complement and perhaps challenge the power of the superintendents and administrators in the association – most of them men – who had controlled the agenda of the NEA for most of its history. Since the election of Ella Flagg Young to head the association, the power of male superintendents relative to female teachers had already been declining, though only marginally. One effect of that relative decline was to enhance the position of women superintendents among the administrative class, including Mary C.C. Bradford and Josephine Preston who were State Superintendents of Public Instruction; and to enhance the position of presidents and professors serving at Normal Schools and Teachers Colleges, most of them men, who had a more sympathetic relationship with classroom teachers than many male superintendents had.

Joseph Swain, the president of Swarthmore College, was the first president of the NEA to address the Department of Classroom Teachers in 1914. His election as president of the NEA depended in part on the credibility he had established with elementary school teachers, through

\[11\] Ibid., 70-71.

his research and reports for the NEA on salaries in the profession, and for his support of equalizing them across the sexes. Despite having this credibility with women teachers, his address to Classroom Teachers Department, which like Ella Flagg Young’s presidency, symbolized women’s emerging power in the association, reflected some anxiety about the shifting power relations between men and women in the organization. “You are on the ground floor,” he asserted, and “as a majority of this section are women, permit me to say I am interested in the women filling their due share of positions.” He hoped, however, that the “time is not far distant when the question will be, not one sex, but of fitness for a given service.” In the short term, the solution was for the teachers to make sure that “the best women in the educational work come regularly to the NEA and take part in its deliberations from year to year.” In that way, the problem of few women in leadership positions in the organization would “take care of itself.”

Swain was followed by a more radical speaker, A.W. Rankin, a professor of education at the University of Minnesota, who appealed more directly to the sense of injustice that motivated many women classroom teachers, as they made stronger demands on superintendents and school boards. His slogan was that education must achieve “democracy in administration.” Administration lacked democracy, he argued, in the sense that local school boards were controlled by business men and “captains of industry” who have little time or experience in managing the schools. As a result, they delegate their job to superintendents, most of who had


“worked up to the positions of school control by … adroit manipulation of boards of education [and] by catering to important business interests.” Unfortunately, the superintendent developed “a cringing spirit towards” the boards “who can injure him,” while at the same time he reigned as an “autocrat, an overlord, and taskmaster” to “his subordinates,” who were “quiet-loving women” who do not, but who should, do more to assert themselves. Thus, the “most vital part of the teaching system, the teacher herself, is left out, because she is not seriously considered as a part of the governing body.” To fix this problem, she should be “admitted to a larger share in the management of schools. Democracy demands it.”

The sense of justice manifest by this theme – that democracy demanded women’s increased share of the authority governing public education – carried the teachers of the National Education Association into the political sphere to make demands up local, state and eventually federal authorities. This demand for democracy was deepened by the broader social context of the women’s suffrage movement, which was on the cusp, many women felt, of achieving victory, perhaps within a few years. Furthermore, the positive outlook on women’s suffrage, and the strong connections between the ideals of democracy and the important role that women played in the American polity, were in turn, amplified by the active role that women played in supporting the nation’s war effort during World War I. As will become clear, it was in that context – of equality for women in American democracy – that the campaign for a federal Department of Education emerged.

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II. World War I and Suffrage for the Woman Teacher, 1917-1920

Josephine Corliss Preston was the first woman elected to be State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Washington. Then, in 1919, after several years of leadership in the NEA, she was elected as its third female president. In July 1917, a few months after the United States had entered World War I, she spoke to teachers at the NEA’s convention in Portland about the role of women educators during the War. “We women who are here today,” she announced, “represent the great army of women educators of this nation who are counted as next to the home in influence and responsibility in the training of the youth of our land.” With the war underway, and the “test of our citizenship has come,” when “our nation’s sons are at the front,” Preston called upon women educators to go “with true mother-hearts … to consecrate to them our dollars and our service.”

The rank and file membership of the NEA did not divorce calls for patriotic service in the middle of the War from the economic status of teachers. An “emergency in education” had developed during the War, as two million men went to the front and left behind a vacuum in the private and public sectors, which many talented women – many of them employed in the schools – moved in to fill. The consequence was a shortage of teachers in the schools. Given that the average salary of teachers was only $600 in 1917, Isabel Ennis, a teacher from Brooklyn, NY, argued that “war bonuses should be given immediately to meet the increast cost of living and the competition of these various industrial, commercial, governmental and clerical positions which are attracting some of the very good teachers from the public schools.” She pointed out that in the halls of the Board of Education building in New York City, the United States government

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had posted “advertisements for stenographers, typewriters, clerks etc. with salaries ranging from $900 to $1200 a year.”\textsuperscript{17} There was no way the public schools could compete with those salaries, funded as they were almost entirely from local property taxes.

NEA leaders linked the problem of teacher shortages to the security of American democracy, arguing that without any remedies, American children would lose their opportunity to be good democratic citizens, which was, after all, one of the primary rationales that had justified the entrance of the nation into the War. Thus, the Department of Classroom Teachers began a concerted effort to examine the “salary question” and resolved to “undertake at once a nation-wide campaign for increase salaries for teachers” by appealing “to the federal government to appropriate sufficient funds to provide such salaries for teachers as will enable boards of education to retain able teachers who are daily being withdrawn from the profession for more lucrative positions in the business world.”\textsuperscript{18}

In this way, the War had added fuel to the fire of women educators’ campaigns for equal pay for equal work that had preceded the war. The War had also, however, changed their viewpoint to some extent: whereas before the War, the issue was to equalize salaries between men and women within the education profession, after the War, the issue was to raise the salaries of the education profession as a whole, relative to the salaries men and women received in other lines of work. Those inequalities in salary across occupations, the NEA believed, were unjustified in a nation that prided itself on being a democracy, and which accepted without dispute the need for an educated and literate citizenry. According to W.C. Bagley, a Professor of


Education at Teachers College at Columbia University, who played an important role in making the case for increased financial support from the federal government, the War had offered a “peculiarly opportune” time “to project an extended national … movement looking toward an appropriate status of the classroom teacher.” This movement should be launched “full tilt immediately after the war” and doing so would be “thoroly in harmony with the spirit and purpose of the great cause for which we are fighting.”

The time was also right to press for an increased federal role because women already had in many states, and soon would have in all of them, the right to vote. During the same convention in 1917 at which Preston had called women educators to patriotic service in a time of war, Margaret McNaught, the California State Commissioner of Elementary Education, focused women’s attention on the “opportunity of the enfranchised woman teacher.” First, she argued that women teachers not only have a “special fitness for the franchise, but also a special need of it.” Their special fitness was due to the “intelligence, education, ideals, patriotism and social aspirations that are necessarily associated with the professional duties and ethics.” Although this professional fitness characterized both male and female teachers, “the woman teacher of our generation has a special qualification derived from the fact that … (she) has the franchise only because of her efforts.” She had “earned it from approving communities by arduous service” and “compelled it from reluctant politicians by the demonstration of a power they dared not oppose.” Since women had already won the right to vote in school-related elections in many


21 Ibid., 244-45.
states, and in general elections in nearly all Western states, the “power of the franchise” not only
brought an opportunity, but imposed a duty – namely, to guard the schools: “The woman teacher
serves humanity by serving the nation thru patriotism. Her task is to teach it in the schools. Her
special charge, therefore, is to guard the schools, and since these are ever subject to popular
opinion exprest at the polls, the franchise is to the teacher at once a sword and a shield in the
exercise of her guardianship.” Furthermore, the teacher could influence public opinion, and had
the “opportunity not only of casting her own vote, but of winning other votes as well.”

Effective use of the right to vote, however, would require that women cultivate a sense of
solidarity to work with one another and to advance a cause of common concern. Several leaders
in the NEA encouraged its women members to develop an esprit de corps. For example, at the
NEA’s convention in Milwaukee in 1919, Annie Webb Blanton, the elected State Superintendent
of Public Instruction from Texas, argued that all women educators should think of themselves as
their “sister’s keeper.” To Blanton, when women educators “struggle to abolish sex distinctions
in wage-earning and in government” they were “acting on the same principle which the world-
war was fought to maintain – that might and power to do not constitute justice and right.” After
noting that it was almost certain that women would have full suffrage before the next presidential
election, she argued that “even with the ballot, the woman’s right to an equal opportunity in the
fields of industry and the various professions is still to be establist.” And, there was perhaps “no
other line of work in which sex privilege is more firmly intrencht than in the teaching
profession.” Against those who argued that there should be no “man-woman division” within
the teaching profession, Blanton countered that the only path forward was on the ground of

22 Ibid., 247-48.
23 Annie Webb Blanton, "Am I my Sister’s Keeper?," in Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the
National Education Association of the United States, Milwaukee, WI, June 28 to July 5, 1919, Vol. 57
solidarity among women: “We must say to the world that we want not only a brotherhood of men, but a sisterhood of women. We want an *esprit de corps* in our sex which recognizes the responsibility of every woman to do her part toward the advancement of the whole body of women workers.” In Blanton’s view, young women must be taught “that no woman achieves man’s respect who is a traitor to her own sex” and that any woman in the education profession who does not work for “the advancement of all womankind” above her own selfish interests is “an ingrate to the pioneers of the past who paved the way for her own advancement.”

In the current of these war and suffrage based arguments for women’s equal status coming from the women’s leadership of the NEA, Mary C.C. Bradford, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Colorado, and president of the NEA in 1918, created the “Commission on the Emergency in Education” which among other things studied the salaries of teachers; created a permanent field secretary, or lobbying agent, for the NEA; enlarged the organization’s membership; proposed a plan for the “more complete democratization of the teaching profession”; and waged a publicity campaign to gain public support for the NEA’s legislative goals. The most important of these, was to advance the Smith-Towner bill to establish a federal department of education and secure federal aid for education.

**III. Pressuring Congress to Make Education a National Priority**

The Smith-Towner bill was the “most important and far-reaching educational measure ever brought before Congress,” according to George Strayer, a professor of educational administration at Columbia University, and president of the NEA from 1918-1919. 25 This bill,

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24 Ibid., 404-04.

along with its successors from 1921 to 1923, had two major components. The first was to create a new federal department of education, headed by a Cabinet-level Secretary appointed by the president with a salary of $12,000, who would have several subordinate officers who would preside over the other agencies of the federal government that Congress decided to transfer into the new department. The new department would have expanded powers compared to the existing Bureau of Education, which was then housed in the Department of the Interior, to conduct research on illiteracy, immigration education, children’s educational opportunities, physical and health education, the preparation and supply of competent teachers for the public schools, and higher education. Congress was authorized to appropriate $500,000 to do this work.

The second, more controversial, goal of the bill was to secure federal aid to the states in support of education, with Congress authorized to spend 100 million dollars. The largest ticket item in the bill was 50 million dollars that would enable the Secretary’s office to “cooperate with the States in the efforts to equalize educational opportunities” especially in rural areas. Most of that amount would go to creating new teaching positions and raising teachers’ salaries. An additional 15 million was to be spent on the preparation and training of teachers, most of which

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26 The bills introduced were introduced for seven years in in the same form, from 1918 to 1924, and were variously referred as the Smith-Towner bill (1919); then the Towner-Sterling bill (1921); and then the Sterling-Reed bill (1923-24). The Smith-Towner bill and the Sterling-Reed bills discussed at the 1919 and 1924 hearings examined here, involve the nearly the same provisions, with the most controversial component being the question of one hundred million dollars of federal aid. The most significant addition in the Sterling-Reed version was language that held that nothing in the bill should be “construed to imply Federal control of education within the States, nor to impair the freedom of the States in the conduct and management of their respective school systems;” and the creation of a National Council on Education composed of the chief school officers of each state, most of who had the title of “State Superintendent of Public Instruction” or “Commissioner of Education”, and of 25 educators representing the different interests in education – a nod to the classroom teachers, and of 25 non-educators, who were “interested in the results of education from the standpoint of the public.” By 1926, the NEA and supporters of the bill had dropped the federal aid component, and simply tried to establish a federal department of education. That version of the bill –known as Curtis-Reed –was discussed at the 1926 hearing, also examined below.
would be funneled to state Normal schools, or teachers’ colleges. In order to receive these funds, states would have to match the federal grants. In addition, states would only be eligible if their laws required that every public-school district “maintain a legal school for at least twenty-four weeks in each year;” included an “adequate compulsory school-attendance law;” and required that the “basic language of instruction in the common school branches in all schools public and private, shall be the English language only.”

The issue of federal dollars for teacher salaries and Normal Schools was not simply a matter of securing more income for teachers. Attracting talent and enhancing the professional status of teachers depended on an adequate basis of financial support as well. Perhaps the most articulate spokesman for how federal aid was needed to enhance the status of classroom teacher was W.C. Bagley, the Professor of Education at Teachers College, at Columbia University. Bagley worried that most teachers are “transient, immature and untrained” and “do not remain in the service long enough to acquire anything more than an amateur’s conception of its problems, its methods, its technique, and its responsibilities.” And because of this, a poor policy similar to a

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27 In addition, money was to be spent on the following: 7.5 million to combat illiteracy; 7.5 million for the “Americanization of immigrants”; and 20 million for the promotion of physical and health education.

28 The provisions quoted here are from the Senate version of the bill. See A Bill to create a Department of Education, to appropriate money for the conduct of said department, to appropriate money for Federal cooperation with the States in the encouragement and support of education, and for other purposes, 65th Cong., 3rd sess., S. 4987.

Horace Mann Towner’s version of the bill, HR 7, had slightly different language: rather than promoting “cooperation” with the states, the bill was to “encourage them”; and the language of the conditions for receiving the equalizing funds were more racially liberal. State laws had to have a school term for the “benefit all children of school age in each state” – an attempt to move the Southern states to provide better school for black children. In addition states could only receive funds if the state’s compulsory school attendance law required “all children between the ages of seven and fourteen years to attend some school for at least twenty four weeks each year” – which specified a higher age requirement for compulsory education. Finally, the language provision was liberalized somewhat to read that “English language shall be the basic language of instruction in the common school branches in all schools, public and private.” See A Bill to create a Department of Education, to authorize appropriations for the conduct of said department, to authorize the appropriation of money to encourage the States in the promotion and support of education, and for other purposes, 66th Cong., 3rd sess., HR 7 (Amended by Report No. 1201).
factory plan had emerged to manage most teachers. So the “status of the classroom teacher is becoming more and more akin to that of the ‘hands’ in a factory, working under foremen and superintendents who assume the real responsibility.”

This factory policy was objectionable for several reasons, but the most important was that it made retaining talent difficult, since the lack of responsibility on the job made the job less appealing for those who were capable of bearing more responsibility and taking greater initiative to perfect the art of teaching. And the only way the nation could guarantee a supply of capable teachers who deserved to wield greater responsibility over “education policy” in the schools, was to increase funding for the institutions that trained these teachers – namely, the state Normal Schools. With increased funds, talented students would be attracted to the Normal Schools, relieved of the cost of their coursework and residence at the Normal Schools; higher salaries would be available for Normal School professors, thus ensuring that those who educate teachers are the best in the field; and, higher teacher salaries would keep the best normal graduates in the classroom. Federal aid was the best way to equalize these opportunities across the nation.

Although federal funding for education was an exciting prospect for the education profession, there was too much resistance to it in Congress. Representative John Jacob Rogers (R-MA), for example, a former local school commissioner from Lowell Massachusetts, strongly opposed federal aid to the states. The vast money appropriated would not only be a great tax burden on the people; it would also lead to standardization and the erosion of local control, which was undesirable. In his view, “Massachusetts or California is a better judge of what her people should learn, and how and in what schools they should learn it, than any bureau or

30 Ibid., 386.
department chief in Washington can be.” Federal aid would inevitably cloud that local judgment. Rogers opposed the 50-50 matching grants from the federal government, dismissing them as “virtual bribes.” He did not believe that a single state would support an increased federal role in public education without the promise of the huge sums of money authorized under the bill. He warned that with so much money in play, a new Secretary of Education would quickly become the “arbiter” of what states would qualify for the funds, and would be able to “control and even standardize education in any or all of the forty-eight states.” Ultimately, Rogers warned, such federal control of education was “bound to be expensive, uneconomical and wasteful;” it would tend to “bureaucracy and paternalism;” and, it would lend itself to “government by propaganda.” Though it was only a beginning, it was a “beginning fraught with danger.”

Ultimately, the federal aid provisions of the bill were too controversial and too expensive, and the NEA realized that they distracted from the original goal the Association had of creating the U.S. Department of Education. Accordingly, the NEA finally dropped the federal aid provisions in its 1926 version of the bill, known as Curtis-Reed. Removing the aid provisions was supposed to nullify arguments from opponents of the Department, who asserted that federal control would follow from federal dollars. However, the other main objective of the bill – to create the Department of Education with a Secretary in the President’s cabinet – endured, and the support for had gained momentum from 1919 to 1926, as the list of large national organizations in favor of such a Department grew and grew. By 1926, 28 national organizations with millions of members across them pledged their support for the new department, and more than half of them were women’s organizations, or organizations with female-majority memberships.

32 The organizations and their memberships, where such figures were available were reported as follows: the National Education Association, 158,000; the American Federation of Teachers, 9,000; the American
Gendered Attitudes toward Increasing the Federal Role in Education

Mary C.C. Bradford, the Colorado State Superintendent and the second woman president of the NEA, was responsible for putting the original Smith-Towner bill on the NEA’s agenda and helping to get it introduced into Congress. She was one of the first to testify at a 1919 Congressional hearing on the bill. First, she commented on how her close connection with the schools had come through her experience supervising teachers, and as a mother. “I have touched the schools as a teacher as well as a school official,” she testified, “and in all that I have tried to do for my very big family of children, I have found that the work the State can do for its own children can only be brought to perfect fruition by the State functioning as a part of the Nation, and by the Nation cooperating with the State in recognition of the welfare of the children that belong to the Nation as well as to the States.” She asked the Committee, with all of her “heart, soul and brain,” and as “a State superintendent, as a teacher, as a mother and a grandmother and a good citizen, to report this bill out.” No bill could be more important than one that dealt with the “greatest asset of the Nation, the child.”

33 Joint Committees on Education and Labor, Joint Hearings before the Committees on Education and Labor on S. 1017 and H.R. 7, To create a Department of Education, to authorize appropriations for the conduct of said department, to authorize the appropriation of money to encourage the states in the promotion and support of education, and for other purposes, 66th Cong., 1st sess., July 10-11 and 22, 1919, 46.
In addition to having the support from the other State Superintendents in other states, and in addition to support from the rank and file of teachers, the bill was supported by the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and other women’s groups, who had shown “a tremendous interest in this bill.” The “women of this Nation are back of it,” Bradford argued, “because you cannot sway the great mass of women to the right or the left when the interests of the children are at stake.” In her view, many women with the experience or expectation of motherhood were “uns selfish” and they did not “want to give things to their own children that they are not willing to give to the children of all the people.” Later on during the hearing, in response to a question from Senator Ferris (D-MI), Cora Wilson Stewart, the National Chairman of the Illiteracy Commission for the NEA, stated that she did “not know of a single women’s organization opposing it.” Ferris had asked the question, he noted, because he wanted to “get the attitude of the women as compared with the chambers of commerce.” In contrast to the women’s clubs, he thought that many of the Chambers “worked towards goals that sometimes conflict with humane and educational needs.”

Mrs. Thomas G. Winter, the President of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs also recorded the support from her organization, representing more than 2 million women. The Federation’s delegates had endorsed the bill during their last three national conventions. Winter argued that “We need just such a broad outlook upon educational affairs and just such a stimulus and Federal assistance as our Government now offers in matters pertaining to agriculture, to commerce, and to stimulation of the affairs of the interior.” And, “since the existence of our

34 Ibid., 47.
35 Committee on Education and Labor, Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 1337, A bill to create a department of Education, to authorize the appropriation of money for the conduct of said department, to authorize the appropriation of money to encourage the states in the promotion and support of education, and for other purposes., 68th Cong., 1st sess., January 22-25, 1924, 225-26.
democratic form of Government depends upon the intelligence of our citizens, it would seem
self-evident that education is a major consideration of the entire Nation.”36 The President of the
National League of Women Voters, Mrs. Maud Wood Park, also pledged her organization’s
support for the bill. She argued that “effective cooperation among the States to give every
American child its American right, a fair education, can be brought about best and most quickly
through the help of such a department.”37 And, she was optimistic that change was forthcoming.
Two years earlier, at the National Education Association convention in Boston, Park had argued
that the time was right for the supporters of an increased federal role in public education to
capitalize on women’s suffrage – which was the primary reason for the existence of her
organization. “Because of the special training life has given us,” Park argued, “we realize better
than men do the need for public education.” She believed, therefore, that “such an organization
as the NEA ought to rejoice in the enfranchisement of women” because the common interests of
women will always be the child and it is the aim of the schools of citizenship conducted by our
League of Women Voters to train women to such use of the franchise as shall make the vote the
powerful and devoted ally of all forward looking plans for education.”38

Anna Gordon, another forceful presence on the stage of women in politics, registered the
support of her organization, the National Women’s Christian Temperance Union, for an
increased federal role in education. She noted how “no government is stronger than its
composite citizenry” and that “weakness or disorder in any State subtracts from the total national
health and security.” Accordingly, “since education promotes the national Welfare, we believe it

36 Ibid., 301.
37 Ibid.
should have the recognition which a Secretary in the Cabinet would give.”

Mrs. Glen Levin Swigget, the Chairman of the Federal Legislative Committee of the National Council of Women, which included 33 national member organizations, representing 11 million women, also testified in support of an Education Secretary. She argued that a federal education department would “follow in the natural and logical order of things in the historical development of this country” and it had “been the practice of this Government to establish executive departments” to foster and promote interests of the people that would be less profitably developed if left “to the several States.”

Early on during one hearing, Representative Daniel Reed (R-NY), a chief sponsor of the bill asked John H. MacCracken, the President of Lafayette College, why most of Congress tended to show little interest in education. “Did it ever occur to you,” Reed asked, “that if the educational group was a factor in politics that it would make quite a difference in the attitude of Congress?” McCracken responded that he thought it would make a big difference, and that he had “noticed some difference since the women have had the vote.” This connection between the NEA and women’s organizations was crucial, and without it, there was little chance the bills would have been kept on the agenda for so long.

*The Political Activism of the NEA’s Rank and File, 1919-1926*

As the Presidents of the NEA and the leaders of women’s organizations and other civic groups argued for an increased federal role in education before Congress, women leaders within

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39 *Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 1337*, 301.

40 Ibid., 308.

41 Joint Committee on Education and Labor, *Proposed Department of Education, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 291 and HR 5000, Bills to Create a Department of Education and for Other Purposes and S. 2841, a Bill to create a Department of Public Education, to Authorize Appropriations for the Conduct and Maintenance of Said Department, and for Other Purposes.*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., February 24-26, 1926, 35.
the NEA worked hard to mobilize the rank and file of the organization, the classroom teachers, and to instruct them in lobbying methods that were required to get the bill passed. These leaders drew upon effective political strategies which women teachers had used in the past, as they had pressed men on urban school boards and in state legislatures to enact salary laws that did not discriminate on the basis of sex. So with the aim of raising the professional status of teachers and “dignifying their work” by instituting a new Cabinet-level Secretary, who would focus the nation on the needs of the teachers and children of the public schools, the women and men of the NEA sought to marshal the large numerical power of the NEA’s 158,000 members to pressure Congress to pass the bill.

The most influential person within the NEA working to make teachers become a factor in politics was Charl Ormond Williams. Williams had been a county superintendent of public schools in Shelby County, Tennessee from 1914-1922, and she became the youngest person elected as President of the NEA in 1921. The members were familiar with her leadership the woman’s suffrage movement. She had, in fact, played a central role in making sure that Tennessee ratified the 19th amendment. With her credentials as a powerful supporter of women’s equality, Williams became the ideal spokesperson for the NEA’s campaigns for a federal role in public education. Accordingly, she became the legislative secretary for the NEA in 1922, and was the woman primarily responsible for putting the bill before Congress during the 1920s. As she worked in Congress to get the bill reported out of committee, she also worked back among the NEA rank and file, to inspire them to work hard in securing the Congressmen’s support. For example, in her speech to the NEA’s Department of Classroom Teachers in 1923, Williams argued that, “we are not going to have a minister of education until every one of the

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700,000 teachers in this country get busy and coordinate the support that has already developed.” For that to happen, her leadership was not enough. She stated, “I have no illusions about my charming personality, my powers of persuasion, or whatever else people are supposed to have at Washington who are trying to put legislation over.” However, she did have the “greatest confidence in you, and you, and the friends you have back there in the various 433 Congressional districts in the United States.” In lobbying Congress, “the battle is going to be lost or won.”

The key to effective lobbying, Williams argued, was to use the power of personal contacts. First, classroom teachers must not only to pressure members of Congress directly; they also had to lead other sympathetic groups into pressuring members of Congress. Williams pointed out that while “we do not want to use methods of coercion,” Congressmen who are open-minded were waiting to be convinced, and of course it was the business of educators – that is, of the rank and file of the classroom teachers, a large majority of them women – to do the convincing. After all, “When those men and women, farmers, laboring men, women belonging to eight or ten of the National organizations – when all these groups become informed about this measure, they expect the teacher in the district, in the school, in the city, in the college, in the university, in the normal school, to stand out just a little ahead of them in the knowledge on this measure and in enthusiasm for it.” Even a member of the country’s Chambers of Commerce could be persuaded, since “a school teacher may have lived in his home” or “may have been the best friend of his wife.” Williams asked the classroom teachers who were “familiar with the

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suffrage fight” not to “lose heart” in their campaign for creating the Department of Education, and to remember how they had made such great strides in the campaign for suffrage.  

IV. Responding to Arguments against a U.S. Department of Education

While supporters looked forward to a future in which a Secretary of Education would focus national attention on the value of the teaching profession, and the work it performed to develop the next generation of the nation’s citizens, opponents envisioned a much darker future if such a Secretary were a part of it. Opposition to the bill came from members of Congress; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; religious organizations affiliated with large schooling systems such as the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church; several prominent scholars and administrators at institutions of higher education; and, from civic organizations claiming “to defend the constitution.”

On Violating the Constitution and the Tendency of Bureaucracy to Become a Tyranny

In the Senate, William King (D-UT), a lawyer and former State Supreme Court Justice form Utah, was one of the first to argue that the bill plainly violated the constitution, since the federal government “possesses only the powers delegated by the states” and “the people reserved to themselves the right to control their own schools and educational systems and their own domestic and local affairs.” Furthermore, he warned, the federal education bill would “increase the bureaucratic power already oppressively exercised in this republic,” and threaten to propagate a spirit of militarism through the schools, as had been the case in “Bismarck’s Germany.” Such a movement towards centralization was against the “temper of the American people,” which called “for the revival of individualism and a spirit of self-government” and for lifting the “heavy hand of the Federal Government,” which had become “an obstacle to

44 Ibid., 571-72.
democratic growth and to the development of the moral and spiritual forces essential for true progress.”

Witnesses testifying before Congress were also quite worried about the tendency of bureaucracy to morph into an unaccountable tyranny. Dr. Machen, for example, a Calvinist minister and a Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, argued that the bill has an “evil purpose,” which was to promote uniformity and central control. Machen argued that “when you get a department with a secretary who has a salary of $15,000 and a great many secretaries under him,” it was not very likely that the department was going “to be very modest about the funds for which it asks.” Similarly, C.M. Zorn, Jr., representing the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America argued that any Department Secretary would want to “justify his holding the job” and would “do everything in his power to wield the greatest possible influence in that department.” In fact, “if he did not, he would not be human.”

Mrs. James G. Whitely, representing the Women’s Constitutional League, an organization claiming to defend the Constitution against all “federal encroachments,” including the maternity act, the child labor amendment and the education bill, similarly warned that any Department Secretary would be tempted to assume more power and grow the size of his Department. In her view, if Congress went ahead with the Curtis-Reed bill, after it had rejected the earlier version that contained the federal aid provisions, “it would be something like the family who decided they would not have a dog in the house, but took in a little pup.”

45 William King, "The Senate Discusses the Towner-Sterling Bill - Con," Congressional Digest December(1921).
46 Ibid., 95, 97.
47 Ibid., 143.
48 Proposed Department of Education, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 291 and HR 5000, Bills to Create a Department of Education and for Other Purposes and S. 2841, 150.
The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also imagined an education future with the vast growth of executive power. Frank Page, a representative of the Chamber, read from a majority report of the association which argued that “if we travel this road we shall end with a great bureaucratic machine at Washington, having its secretary of education in the Cabinet, its assistant secretaries of education, and a horde of bureau chiefs and clerks and three-quarters of a million of Federal employees teaching the schools and bossed by several thousand field inspectors and other petty traveling officials.”

Mary G. Kilbreth, the President of the Woman Patriot Publishing Co. also worried about the apparatus of a centralized government. She disputed the NEA’s claims that the United States needed a minister of education like the countries of Europe had, retorting that those “centralized European systems are maintained for indoctrinating children with the ideas of the government in power”, and they had no place in the United States. Any move toward such centralization would “constitute an ‘apparatus’ of power which could be captured by any dominant faction to control the teachers and the schools of the whole country.”

On the Sufficiency of a Bureau to serve the Proposed Department’s Role

Some opponents were less alarmed. A simple argument against the Department was that the existing Bureau of Education, housed within the Department of Interior, could take on the added research functions proposed in the bill, if the Bureau was simply appropriated more money, and because of that, there was no reason to transform the Bureau into an independent federal department. When asked about this alternative at a hearing, Charles H. Judd, the Director of the School of Education at the University of Chicago, argued that a Bureau chief simply would not have the same capacity to raise his concerns to the president. According to Judd, “the present Secretary of the Department of the Interior is engaged in so many enterprises that when

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49 Ibid., 117.
50 Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 1337, 357.
he goes into the President’s councils his mind must be full of a number of things.” The situation would be improved “if on each of these occasions when he sits with the President it were possible for him to concentrate his whole thinking on education.” Then, “we could have more rapid progress … than is possible to be gotten when education is sandwiched in with the multiplicity of concerns which must fill his mind.”

Getting the attention of the President was, however, only the means to a more important goal, which was to move the nation to increase its recognition of education policy and its administration as a matter of national importance. For example, F.B. Hass, the State Superintendent from Pennsylvania, argued that creating the new Department was not merely about ensuring more appropriations to do what the Bureau of Education was already doing. Rather, a “political philosophy” was at stake. In his understanding of good administration, “the ranking position of any administrative agency in the total administrative scheme sets the relative value of the function that the agency is serving” in relation to those agencies which rank below it, on level with it, and those which are above it. Therefore, it seemed to him that the controversy basically turned on “the political philosophy underlying the State’s relation to its educational interests.” According to Haas, if “educational interests relatively have the same rank to our national life as those other great interests which are served by our secretaries of departments, then it seems to be inevitable that a secretary of education is justified, and along with it a department.”

Julia Sullivan, the President of the Department of Classroom Teachers of the NEA, expanded on these arguments about hierarchies and rank, and presented an interesting

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51 Proposed Department of Education, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 291 and HR 5000, Bills to Create a Department of Education and for Other Purposes and S. 2841, 21.
52 Ibid., 155.
perspective from the elementary teachers she represented, who also believed that having a cabinet Department rather than merely a Bureau was important. At a Congressional hearing in 1926 on the Curtis-Reed bill, Sullivan said:

You know, as I listened here this morning, it seemed to me that the Bureau of Education was very much in the same class with the classroom teacher, submerged in a very important department [within the NEA], and in a Government whose chief interest should be the education of its citizens, and they are submerged in another department. It made me think of the classroom teacher. We are always told that this is the real foundation upon which the rest of the structure rests; but until recently the classroom teacher has not had any share in shaping those policies. With better appreciation, with better attainment and with wider knowledge of the work that has been done by education association, the classroom teachers through the country has been awakening to her responsibilities, and has been asking for a share in shaping the policies under which she works. …. It has seemed to me that it should be our function to see that every child in the Nation has an equal educational opportunity. If this can be achieved through a department which would give publicity to these things, … it seems to me that would be a step in the right direction.53

These comments suggest that the basic demands classroom teachers had been making since World War I to enhance women’s authority within the schools – that is for greater democracy in education, where the new democracy including a female voting electorate – resonated at a higher register of women’s political empowerment within the American federal system. With comparable political logics, in the same way that women school teachers desired greater salaries

53 Ibid., 37-38.
and professional autonomy and respectability with respect to the local, and typically male administrators governing them, they also desired to see the education policy field as a whole, which itself was subordinated, elevated into the ranks of the higher orders of policy administration in the federal bureaucracy. This pattern of associating the subordinate status of the female classroom teacher to the local administration, on one hand, with the subordinate status of educational policy in the hierarchy of the federal bureaucracy, on the other hand, is the key, I would suggest, to understanding the general enthusiasm that all educators had, male and female, for creating a cabinet level federal department of education.

The teachers believed that they deserved the same “representation” and seat at the table in the federal bureaucracy that men with natural resource interests, farmers, lawyers, businessmen, and male labor unions had through their corresponding Secretaries in the President’s cabinet. The cause was about securing increased power for an emerging profession of women teachers, who felt that their work mattered as much in securing the national prosperity, and perhaps even more so, than the men who worked in these other occupations. A humorous movement poem that reflected these concerns circulated in the early 1920s. Mattie M. Montgomery, a teacher from Missouri, recommended to classroom teachers that they use the poem to gain support from teachers who were not members of the NEA. In the poem, school children realized they had no one in Washington, D.C. who would hear their concerns in:

They heard of how the stock Pow-Wow
Had gone to Washington;
That pigs have there a Secretaire
To see their rights are won.
If calves and shoats and billy-goats
Can see the President,
Then surely they should have their say
In their predicament.

The solider lads, the naval dads
The silver and the gold
Each labor crew and postman too,
Are all within the fold;
The farmer man, the lawyer clan,
Ambassador and suite,
Each has his chair and Secretaire
In retinue complete.

The outward things from silk and rings,
From coal to daily food;
Each has a throne for it alone.
Alas, alas, ‘tis true,
The cattle get a Cabinet,
A pigeon-hole for You. 54

The poem captured the sense among teachers that priorities of the national government were disordered. There was a certain injustice, in their view, in the fact that the federal government would pay more attention to pigs and cattle and to the other concerns of the existing Cabinet departments that focused on material things, than it would pay to the nation’s children, and the teachers who looked after their education.

On the Dangers of Politicizing Education by Creating the Department

A final objection to creating the new cabinet-level position was that creating the Department would politicize education and lead to control of the nation’s schools by the “teachers’ lobby.” This argument was advanced forcefully by Frank Goodnow, the President of Johns Hopkins University, and the first President of the American Political Science Association. Goodnow argued that creating a Cabinet level Secretary of Education would “inevitably bring the whole field of education into the field of active politics.” The NEA’s claim that education “does not occupy a sufficiently dignified position unless it is recognized” by “a member of the

President’s Cabinet” as the policy fields of agriculture, business and labor were so recognized, was not the right way to look at it. Unlike education, “agriculture, labor and commerce represent very distinct economic interests in the county which need and should have representation, as they do have, in the Government of the United States.” To Goodnow, educators had no distinct economic interest. The “only way in which you may say that we who are interested in education represent an economic class in the community is the fact that we get salaries – that is all – and the tendency is going to be, of course, with the vast number of instructors and teachers throughout the country, for the development of a lobby simply to raise salaries, not with the idea of representing what is a vital economic interest in the community.”

For those reasons, Goodnow opposed any “government attempt to transfer from a reasonably permanent officer of the Government, as the Commissioner of Education is, in this nonpolitical field as it should be, over into the hands of an officer who in the nature of things will inevitably be a political officer,” responsible to the new lobby.55

In taking this perspective, Goodnow essentially ignored, or sought to undermine, the guiding professional concern of the NEA, which since 1913 had been working to increase salaries – which, while that of course was an economic factor – was merely one factor related to the more fundamental goal of attracting more talent into the teaching corps, and to improve the status of the profession, both of which, in turn were necessary in order to secure the educational interests of the children of the country. The NEA’s belief was that only with enhanced status and with it the authority that would follow, could teachers – the people with the closet knowledge of the needs of school children – exert any commanding respect over the agencies of financial control of the school systems – the state legislatures and the local school boards.

55 Ibid., 109-10.
Representative Black (D-NY), who opposed the bill, pursued a similar line of questioning when he asked Julia Sullivan, the president of the NEA’s Department of Classroom teachers, whether the new Secretary would just adopt policies in line with the “political future” of the party of the President. In her response, Sullivan shrewdly deflected the intent of the question, and assumed the non-partisan disposition of many women in politics at that time, who claimed not to see the issues through a partisan lens. “Of course,” she replied, “you gentlemen know more about that than I do, but I have voted enough to believe that while we are a Government of parties, even though I may not vote for a man, that after he is elected he will do the things for which he took the oath of office, and that is the thing for which we educate the citizens of our country to be true to the oath of office they take. And, I have faith enough in any man who would take the oath of office to believe that he would do the best for the good of the people of America.”

The potential power of a teachers’ bloc, or lobby, more so than the political calculations of a politically appointed Secretary of Education, was the more fundamental concern of opponents of the bill. A Judge from Cleveland, Sam B. Cull, who apparently represented no one other than himself, a fact that led some Congressmen to wonder why he was even at the hearing, read from an outdated Carnegie Foundation report, which referred to older version of the bill that contained provisions for federal aid. The report claimed, in rhetoric that ignored the key role that classroom teachers had played in the NEA for more than a decade, and which dismissed them as the dupes of a conniving, power-hungry leadership, that “through the National Education Association, the public school teachers of the country are being organized en bloc in the support of a bill before the Congress which carries, among other provisions, a large appropriation

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56 Ibid., 42.
available for the partial payment of teachers’ salaries.” And, the pressure the NEA was now exerting on Congress was a “matter of grave public concern.” If the NEA headquarters of the NEA and their legislative secretary, Charl Williams, had their way, “there can be little doubt that in the future, public-school teachers will constitute a distinct bloc organized under energetic leadership to secure specific benefits for their own groups.”\(^{57}\)

Mrs. Rufus M. Gibbs, Chairman of the American Federation of Democratic Women, also pleaded against the interests of the teacher lobby and the women leading it, who in her view, sometimes overstepped the bounds of appropriate behavior. Gibbs possessed a very unfavorable view of the NEA, as a group of “resident lobbyists that seem to be so completely at home here that they trudge around these halls without hats” and “apparently spend their lives here.” The reason they spend all that time in Congress, she suggested was that they were busy chasing millions of dollars for salaries for teachers, at the taxpayers’ expense. Gibbs was sure of this because the NEA’s legislative secretary, Charl Williams, who “seems to have been always present here and was here two years ago and sat next to Senator Sterling and examined witnesses until she was told that she did not belong the committee,” had declared that “it is inconceivable that the NEA will ever give up the idea of the extension of Federal aid to education.”\(^{58}\)

Mary Kilbreth, who was also affiliated with Constitutional Leagues, was also opposed to the blatant “political nature” of the bill, and made her point from an interesting and astute, historical perspective. She noted how bills to create a federal department of education had always been about spending money in order to purchase votes. The current wave of support for the new department was the same kind of politics that led to the establishment of the old department of education in 1867, “during the confusion subsequent to a great a war.”

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 147.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 168-69.
politicians back in 1867 were puzzled as they prepared to “handle the huge new negro addition to the electorate;” and the politicians today were also puzzled as to how to handle the “the recent huge addition of women to the electorate.” Kilbreth noted that this was plainly a “woman’s bill – sponsored almost entirely by organized women – and organized women propose to handle it and our whole educational system if this department is established.”

Criticisms of this kind led Senator Ferris (D-MI), a supporter of the bill to remark that, even if this were true, which he did not believe it was, it would only show that the teachers were being “pretty fair politicians.” In fact, Ferris argued, it “was about time they became pretty fair politicians; the way this Government is run now there is no show for any group of workers unless they go into politics; and if you propose to keep the teachers out of politics, you are just fooling yourself.” When Representative Black (D-NY) commented sarcastically that “this is a ticket of admission to the political field, all right,” Ferris snapped back with a truth, that reveals a key gendered dynamic at work in the opposition’s attempt to undermine the newly expressed political power of the NEA as an effective lobbying group: “There is no use trying to establish some little sect, or some little view of human society whereby the teachers are to be kept out of politics, or women are to be kept out of politics. They are in, and going to stay in.”

V. Opponents of the Department Prevailed, for the Time Being

For the time being, these women in politics working through the National Education Association could not overcome the inertia of the status quo, nor could they overcome arguments that creating the new department would lead to an unconstitutional federal encroachment into

59 Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 1337, 362.

60 Ibid., 363.

61 Proposed Department of Education, Joint Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor on S. 291 and HR 5000, Bills to Create a Department of Education and for Other Purposes and S. 2841, 144-45.
public education. Those arguments, coupled with a well-organized counter campaign from Catholic associations who lobbied key members of Congress from New York and Boston, were able to prevent the NEA from realizing its national goals.\footnote{Slawson, The Department of Education battle, 1918-1932: public schools, Catholic schools, and the social order.} Although the NEA did not lose sight of its goal to create the Department, the Association’s energetic commitment to it died off during the 1930s and 1940s, because of the Great Depression and World War II. After the war, Congress’s authorization to reorganize the executive branch led President Eisenhower to create a Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1953, by an executive order. That reorganization was met with warm, though less than enthusiastic support from the NEA, whose members desired to see their policy field have the full attention of a cabinet-level Secretary. The NEA did not wage another major campaign to create a U.S. Department of Education, until the 1970s, which ultimately proved successful in 1979.

The extent to which the NEA entered into partisan politics is one of the major differences between these two campaigns, separated by half a century. During the earlier campaign, the NEA was bound to two non-partisan aspects of the political identity of its largely female membership that made it shy away from politics. First, its members wanted teachers to be recognized as esteemed professionals. Unlike teachers in the NEA’s rival organization, the American Federation of Teachers, teachers in the NEA believed they could only secure a greater say in national policy-making so long as they remained “dignified,” and that meant in part that they would speak less openly about their own material economic interests, a rhetorical strategy that differentiated them from labor unions. Second, the mass based movement to create the Department in the 1920s was thoroughly tied up with the non-partisan identities and non-partisan political strategies of many American women in that decade, forged at a time when many women
suffragists argued that women would have more political clout if they remained independent of the major political parties. The women members of the NEA had also been schooled in the non-partisan political strategies of Congressional lobbying, which had been their main source of power prior to the suffrage amendment. As will become clear – both of these aspects of women teachers identities began to change in the 1960s, as the rank and file of the organization became increasingly supportive of labor union strategies for political influence, including strikes and collective bargaining. In addition, it was only after the NEA entered partisan presidential politics for the first time in its century long history, when it endorsed Jimmy Carter for President in 1976, that the organization finally achieved its long sought after goal to create a U.S. Department of Education. By then, the NEA’s membership had grown to nearly 3 million members, and mobilizing those numbers for the first time in a presidential election, enabled them to finally achieve their goal.

After Congress acted to create the Department, President Carter nominated a woman, Judge Shirley Hufstedler, to be the first U.S. Secretary of Education. Because she was a lawyer and not an educator, his choice was unwelcomed by the NEA. Opponents of the department suspected that Carter’s choice had been made in part to neutralize their fears that the Department was going to be controlled by the “teacher’s lobby.” Her nomination did have that effect, and she was quickly confirmed by the Senate. In 1990, Hufstedler reflected on her position in the Carter administration as a new cabinet member, and confirmed what Mary C.C. Bradford and Charl Ormond Williams had argued during the 1920s to create her office – that actually having political power depended on the appearance of having it, and the Secretary position made education visible to the President. Unquestionably in her mind, her cabinet level status made her more powerful than her predecessors had appeared to be, all of them male, and all of them
merely Commissioners, tucked away within the Interior Department and then HEW. Hufstedler commented:

> It is extremely important to have education at the cabinet table. Why? Because Washington runs on power and the perceptions of power, whether it is there or not. Whoever reports to the President is automatically deemed to have power, and, by the way, usually does. And the farther you get pushed away, the less things happened. As a Cabinet secretary, I could get the media into the schools. As a commissioner of education, forget it. As a Cabinet member, I could get the support of the President on an education bill when I needed it, and senators and congressmen from either party would listen. Even if they don't always agree, you had your hearing.\(^6^3\)

Getting that hearing and having a venue for that hearing was tremendously important. It had not been built specifically for women or in order to meet women’s concerns. However, it did provide a space in the federal government for teachers, whose professional concerns had always been linked to the socioeconomic and status concerns of women and of the men who worked in an occupation dominated by women, to press their claims. Although Hufstedler, as a federal district court judge, was in a sense unqualified for the job because she lacked the professional experience of a classroom teacher, it was her job to represent teachers, and to be their advocate. After becoming Secretary, when she addressed the NEA for the first time, she acknowledged she was a little out of place, and sought to engender some familiarity: "Administering a Department of Education, like being a classroom teacher,” she said “is very hard work.”\(^6^4\)

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