

Files

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White House Task Force on Education

INTERVIEW WITH DR. HERMAN OFFNER, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF FIELD SERVICES

Dr. Offner briefly summarized for me the historical development of the Office field structure. He said that the first time the office sent individuals to the field was under the Federally Affected Areas Program. There are currently one chief representative and two or more other assistants in each regional office who spend full time on this program and nothing else. These still constitute the bulk of the field staff.

The second development which required establishing people in the field was administration of the Student Loan Program under the National Defense Education Act. The main function was to help colleges set up loan programs. Later, the responsibility for assisting colleges to set up foreign language and guidance institutes and to evaluate performance of such institutions was also put in the field.

In 1959, under Commissioner Berthick, it was decided to put a representative of the Commissioner's Office in each region. The initial concept of these Commissioner's representatives was to provide some degree of coordination and to handle common administrative problems; to provide general information to the various clientele groups on Office of Education programs; to provide a direct line from the Commissioner to the field to enable him to assess the problems and thinking of leaders of education, including state school officers, college presidents, state educational associations, etc.; to handle individual complaints; to provide informational and consultative service to school officials and to steer them to the appropriate places in the office for ideas, guidance, assistance, etc.

Dr. Offner indicated that the people already in the field resented to some degree the imposition of the Commissioner's representative because they didn't want any second guessing on their decision making, and there was considerable suspicion that they were "stool pigeons" on their activities. He said there was some overtones of this that still exist today.

Dr. Offner also indicated that at one point there was considerable thinking in the direction of putting the Commissioner's field representatives under the Office of Administration rather than reporting directly to the Commissioner.

Since 1959, additional assignments have been made to the field of a total of nineteen professional people who work with State Employment Service and the Labor Department on the Manpower Development and Training Act Programs for Adult Education. Also, the Division of Vocational and Technical Education has begun to decentralize to some degree and they are currently recruiting to put additional people in the field to work on their programs. Under the National Defense Education Act, one job has been set up in San Francisco to work on science and mathematics programs, and there are plans to set up a second in Kansas City.

This summarizes the extent of field activity now going on, but Dr. Offner's concerns are limited to dealing through the Commissioner's field representatives in keeping them posted on what is taking place in the headquarters, and getting thoughts from them on the field picture. One of his responsibilities is to summarize the monthly reports received from the field representatives and to send a brief consolidated report to the Commissioner.

Dr. Offner also heads up a very small office which is concerned with civil defense education.

Among the problems identified by Dr. Offner were the following:

1. The already described situation where the Commissioner's representatives tend to be somewhat resented and where they really have no program control over the field representatives of the Bureaus.
2. Dr. Offner feels that he has been sidetracked, since he no longer has a direct line to the Deputy Commissioner or the Commissioner, because he is not now a member of the executive group. He has also been instructed to so brief his summaries of field reports that he feels that they cannot really serve their basic function of being a primary means of communication on the state of education to the Commissioner. He has no direction as yet on just what is wanted from the field and, while he is still sending reports to Commissioner Keppel, he has no feed-back on whether they serve any effective purpose. He also feels he has great difficulty in keeping the field representatives posted on what is taking place because he is not in a position to get firsthand current information.
3. Three of the Commissioner's field representative posts are vacant and have been permitted to remain vacant for some years. He does not have authorization to proceed with filling them.

I asked Dr. Offner for his feelings as to whether more activity could effectively be decentralized in the field. He expressed the belief that program decisions in new programs have to be looked at carefully centrally, but after they have settled down and they have become "more mechanical" they can then

be decentralized. However, he could not supply specific recommendations as to where such decentralization could effectively be accomplished, except in the vocational educational areas which are currently moving in this direction. I also asked him whether he felt that the Commissioner's regional representative should continue to have the information and advisory role they now have, or whether they should have greater line authority. It was his feeling that they should have greater line authority flowing from the Commissioner so that they could make more effective use across the board on Office of Education programs or field staff resources.

I also asked Dr. Offner whether it was necessary to have nine offices at each one of the DHEW Regional Offices. He said that the Denver Office could be immediately eliminated, in his opinion, and that he would combine the Boston Office with New York. The remainder, he thought, should continue.

Dr. Offner also volunteered the observation that you could not effectively handle Federal-State relations out of one central staff office in Washington, in spite of Dr. Reed's contact, but that these functions can better be done in the field through the regional representatives.

I also asked Dr. Offner about the involvement of the field in the civil rights area, and he indicated that the field representatives have served a function on an advisory basis to state school officers on what action they should take in order to meet the requirements of the Civil Rights Act, and that they have provided a valuable service in this area in convincing school officers of the need to comply and what action they should take in order to be acceptable.

I also asked Dr. Offner's general recommendations with regard to the overall organization of the Office. He said he felt that the current organization is illogical because, for example, the Bureau of Higher Education currently cannot really speak for the Office in this area, since some relationships with higher education are still in the Bureau of Educational Assistance. He also believes that statistics and research should be tied together, and elementary and secondary education should be centralized into one office.

With respect to the Bureau of International Education, he felt that what is being done now there is not of bureau level, but there is room for a function at this level with particular emphasis on a leadership role for American education with respect to the general world and international situation.

Dr. Offner also expressed the belief that while program evaluation is essential, he cannot use the present field structure for evaluation because the bureau people will resent having someone else evaluate their programs. He thought that a stronger field structure would be needed to permit program evaluation in the field. Also, that some firsthand observation in evaluating what is taking place would be essential to supplement any statistical or reporting system for evaluating impact of programs.

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Attached are a copy of a typical report from one of the Commissioner's Regional Representatives in Chicago, and three monthly summary reports, for January, February, and March, prepared by Dr. Offner. Also attached is a summary of contacts of various kinds, by mail, telephone, and office calls, received by Dr. Offner when he was the Commissioner's Regional Representative in New York.

OBSERVATIONS ON DR. OFFNER: Dr. Offner gave me the very distinct impression that he has been sidetracked. He is looking forward to retirement in the relatively near future, although he did not indicate that this was imminent. He did not impress me as a highly articulate or intelligent individual. He, obviously, leveled with me and his perceptions in some areas as to what has happened to the field structure, and his own situation, are pretty accurate. He does not give the impression, however, of a person who can give dynamic leadership to a field program.

Attachments:

Rpt. of Reg. Rep., Chicago
Cy Monthly Summary Rpts. (3)
Summary of Contacts...

cc: Dwight A. Ink
Nicholas Oganovic
Herbert Jasper

GASchulkind/tvf

cc: Subject - OFS File
Chron