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ED ESHLEMAN'S WASHINGTON REPORT

More and more our schools are moving away from local control and into the hands of State governments and Washington bureaucrats. This trend is very much tied to the question of how our schools should be financed. Traditionally our schools have been financed and run at the local level. But as education has become more expensive, State and Federal money has become almost as important as local funding. And with this "outside" money has come a loss of local authority in determining school curriculum and policy.

As the trend away from local control accelerates, I have to wonder if we should not be a little more critical of the trend. At least, there should be some in-depth evaluation of evidence that suggests we may be moving in the wrong direction.

For instance, one of the latest educational campaigns is taking place in the courts. This campaign is to get a ruling that using the local property tax to finance schools is unconstitutional because it leads to some school districts having more money to spend per pupil than other districts have. Those who favor such a ruling generally feel that inner city schools should be brought up to the same

educational quality as suburban school and the only way to do that is equalize the tax base.

But equalizing property tax on a statewide basis may not help inner city schools at all. A study at Syracuse University shows that big city schools are not underfinanced. There is no doubt that they are full of educational problems, but the chief problem is not a lack of funds. In fact, according to the study, if schools are financed equally, the big gainers would be rural districts and central cities would not gain but lose.

Anyone who recognizes that city schools are faced with a crisis situation knows full well that they cannot afford to lose money at this point. Therefore, the very court action that is designed to help the inner cities could end up harming their educational systems.

But there is even a far more serious question involved. If we destroy the local tax base, we also destroy all pretense of local school control. Rural and suburban schools would be the losers if that happened because they have traditionally priced themselves on their relationship to the community and their dependence on it. And if it turns out that we abandon the concept of local schools for all the wrong reasons, what will there be to assure us of the kind of quality education we have come to expect in this country?


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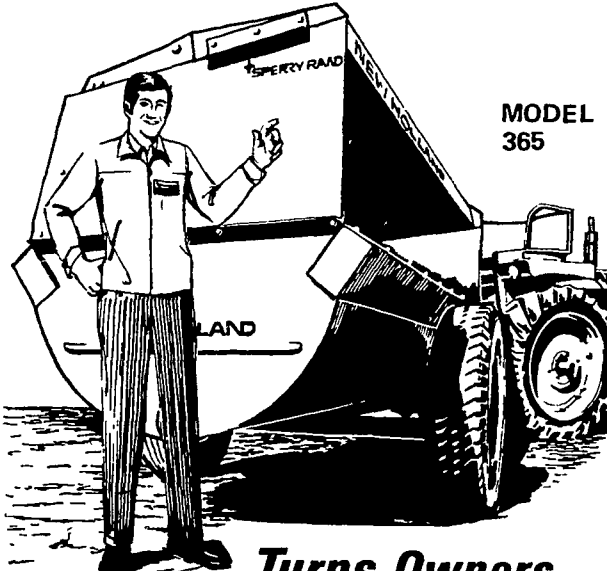
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