Education Reform? The Devil's in the Details

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Congress is about to pass legislation that will federalize every local school district and spell the end of local and state control of America's public school classrooms. Mindful of Ronald Reagan's words, "You can't control the economy without controlling the people," Bill and Hillary Clinton have found the way to control the economy by controlling America's schoolchildren.

The plan started with the passage of Bill Clinton's two 1994 laws, the Goals 2000 Act and the School-to-Work Act, and we were moved further in the same direction with his Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Now, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), H.R.2/S.2, the Clintons are about to complete the nationalization of the public school classroom.

This massive education bill is the eighth successive five-year plan to increase academic achievement by providing "compensatory education" grants to schools with high concentrations of low-income children. It is more ambitious and comprehensive than the Clintons' discredited 1994 health care plan.

A holdover from Lyndon Johnson's Great Society legislation, the ESEA has already spent more than $116 billion. According to the Federal Government's five-year $29 million longitudinal study concluded in 1997, the ESEA failed to achieve its objectives.

Unable to make the argument that ESEA, with its current price tag in excess of $10 billion per year, will raise academic achievement of poor children, the Clintons designed this "stealth" legislation with very different objectives. Pretending to "educate to high standards," ESEA mandates that all 50 states agree to implement a one-size-fits-all education plan.

How? The bill calls for mandated "statewide minimum competencies for all children." That's code

language for the disastrous and discredited Outcome Based Education (OBE).

OBE (also called performance-based education) is measured by "criterion referenced tests" that assess students against a low threshold of achievement (formerly associated with the letter grade "D"), rather than by "norm referenced tests" which measure how well students master a body of knowledge in comparison with other students (such as the ACT, SAT, GRE, Iowa Basic, and Stanford Achievement tests).

ESEA's purpose is to tie schools to the floor of minimum achievement rather than to the ceiling of educational excellence and possibilities. The oft-repeated phrase "all children will learn" really means that all children will be taught only the low level of learning that is actually reached by all children.

The term "minimum competencies" doesn't sell well to parents and the taxpaying public, so a linguistic bait-and-switch occurs throughout the bill. "Standards" means minimum levels, "accountability" means accountability to the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, "integrated curriculum" means integrating job training into the school day, and "local control" means control only over implementing the nonacademic job-training system but not over standards, content or testing.

Not only does ESEA force OBE and criterion-referenced testing on every local school district in the nation, ESEA cements into place the goals of nationalized curriculum, nationalized testing and national teacher certification, which were envisioned in the 1994 Goals 2000 Act. ESEA also continues the radical changes required by the 1994 School-to-Work Act to guide schools away from a knowledge-based system and toward training for jobs selected by local workforce boards.

School-to-Work is the Clintons' vision for controlling the economy. Students will be pigeon-holed into jobs to serve the best interests of the local economy as decided by the bureaucrats, not into careers chosen by the student.

"But," Congress proclaims, "the Goals 2000 and School-to-Work laws are sunsetting!" Nothing could be further from the truth.

While those laws are about to expire, all 50 states adopted them and ESEA requires that states certify they have adopted "challenging content standards and challenging student performance standards . . . with aligned assessments." That is bureaucratic jargon for continuing the 1994 Goals 2000/School-to-Work mandates.

ESEA has already moved far in the legislative process because Congress was hoodwinked by the bill's doublespeak language and only now is beginning to understand that the Goals 2000 and School-to-Work laws have morphed into ESEA. If ESEA passes in its current form, every public school district will be forced to continue implementation of the revolutionary restructuring required by the 1994 laws.

ESEA is not stand-alone legislation but works in tandem with other federal, state and local programs to mesh curriculum, graduation requirements and public funds into state-filed, federally-approved Unified Plans under the Workforce Investment Act. Under the guise of education "reform," all traditional public school curriculum, testing and teaching methods are being replaced with a job training system modeled after failed socialized economies in Europe.

ESEA will fulfill Bill and Hillary Clinton's dream of national economic planning fed by a federalized workforce training system domiciled in the public schools. ESEA is the capstone of their plan to restructure our American system away from free enterprise, academic achievement in schools, and the freedom of individuals to select their future occupations.