PS1 for 12/10/87#LET'S FINANCE STUDENTS, NOT SCHOOLS

At last a businessman has spoken out and called a spade a spade about the way business has had to assume the costs of teaching new employees what they should have learned in public elementary schools. David T. Kearns, board chairman of the Xerox Corporation, has sent an open letter to all Presidential candidates in which he complained that teaching new workers the basic skills amounts to businesses ""doing the schools' product recall work for them -- and frankly I resent it.''

He should resent it! There is no reason why employers should have to pay to teach workers the essential skills that the taxpayers have already paid the schools to teach them.

For the foreseeable future, American businesses will have to hire a million new workers a year who can't read, write or count. Teaching them how, and absorbing the lost productivity while they are learning these basic skills, costs industry $25 billion a year.

Kearns opposes corporations donating money to public education. He says such donations hurt more than they help because they let the school system frame the problem and set the agenda.

Kearns ridicules what he calls these ""feel-good'' partnerships; they give corporations a ""feel-good,'' altruistic feeling, but they only pour good money after bad. It's as futile, he said, as ""doing your daughter's homework.''

Kearns offers several constructive suggestions, and his most constructive is the idea that our tax dollars should finance (BF)students(end BF) instead of schools. We need a complete changeover to a system whereby we let students attend any school they want to attend and bring their education dollars with them.

Such a system would use the magic ingredient of competition to invigorate public school education and let us escape from the present

failed monopoly. The public school system today is an immense and authoritarian bureaucracy, exercising its tight and total ""control of dissatisfied markets.''

In a competitive school system, schools would have to compete for students and dollars. Operating income would be directly related to customer service.

The schools that produced a better product would have parents beating a path to their doors. The others would have to shape up and do better, or go the way of other mismanaged businesses and companies that produce products nobody wants.

Funding students instead of schools would be the most democratic and equitable of all systems. For the first time, poor families would have the same options enjoyed only by the affluent today. Comparable children would be funded equally, thus eliminating the great disparities of resources among school districts today.

Competition is a fact of life in American industry. We have to compete in a world economy, and by 1990 three out of four jobs will require some education or technical training after high school.

Where will the new workers come from when half of those in public schools can't read or write? America's public schools graduate 700,000 functional illiterate kids every year -- and 700,000 more drop out.

Yet, public expenditures on public education have doubled or tripled in every postwar decade, even when enrollments declined. Kearns asks, ""what other sector of American society has absorbed more money by serving fewer people with steadily declining service?''

Kearns says that public schools are still locked into the old turn-of-the-century hierarchical models that business discarded long ago. Schools ought to look like ""the smartest high-tech companies look today, with lean structures and flat organizations.''

Kearns says it's time to stop ""tinkering at the margins of the education problem.'' He thinks ""the survival of this country and our way of life'' depend on ""a total restructuring from the bottom up.''

In addition to calling for free-market choice in school selection and for restructuring to make the school an agent of real education, Kearns calls for a professionalized accountable teacher corps, high academic standards, and respect for traditional values.

Kearns thinks that ""anyone who thinks it's possible to have a value-neutral education is dead wrong.'' He correctly points out that excluding values from schools teaches the ""value'' that values aren't important.

Kearns agrees that children need to learn moral values at home. But the school needs to reinforce moral precepts and the responsibilities of citizenship because ""a democratic society won't stay democratic very long if it doesn't teach a love of democracy and insure that that love is passed on to its kids.''