PS1 for 1/14/88#THREE CHEERS FOR BILL BENNETT

Bully for Bill Bennett! Somebody finally had the courage to say the emperor has no clothes on, and to specify how he can be properly dressed. Secretary of Education said that American high school students aren't getting their money's worth out of their high school courses, and he has made specific suggestions on how to remedy the deficiencies.

Bennett calls his recommendations the ""James Madison High School'' curriculum. He thinks it is the birthright of every American child to have access to this core curriculum.

When a teacher asked some below-average students what they would like to read, one pupil answered, ""We want to read what the smart kids read.'' The response delighted Bennett who thinks his get-tough curriculum is what both students and parents want.

It includes an ""Introduction to Literature'' for freshmen using recognized masterworks of Western literature such as Homer, parts of the Bible, Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Dickens. The second year, students would get a dose of American literature by Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Whitman, Melville, Faulkner and others.

The third year, students would read selections of British fiction, drama and poetry, including Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, the Brontes, Shaw and, of course, Shakespeare. The fourth year, students would be given a careful selection of European and non-Western literature, including selections from Greek and Roman classics, Dante, Cervantes, Moliere, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky.

Over the four years of English courses, students would also learn how to write a coherent essay, revise and edit their work, and give oral reports in class. Regular writing assignments would demand clarity, precision, and frequent revision.

Students would have three years of social studies: one year of

Western civilization, one of American history, and one year of principles of American democracy. Two years of a foreign language would be required.

The math requirement would be three years from among Algebra, Plane & Solid Geometry, Trigonometry, Statistics & Probability, and Calculus. The science requirement would be three years from among Astronomy/Geology, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics.

To those who say this curriculum is too demanding and concentrated, Bennett replies that it still leaves 25 percent of the available class time for supplemental, elective, or locally required study. There is still plenty of time for electives such as Physical Education, Health, Typing, Psychology, Bookkeeping, Technical Writing, Graphic Arts, Band, etc.

The education report called ""A Nation at Risk,'' published in 1983, revealed that in most schools, students take a full quarter of credits in non-academic subjects such as physical education, work experience outside school, remedial math and English, and ""personal service and development'' courses. But in many schools, the Commission found, this nonacademic curriculum has expanded at the expense of essentials such as history and algebra.

If some children's present preparation for high school is inadequate for the James Madison Curriculum, that is an argument for further improvements in elementary and intermediate education. It is not, however, an argument for abandoning current high school students. If some students cannot learn algebra and geometry in two years, then they should be given three, and the extra help they need.

""I am pleased to report that everything envisioned for James Madison High School is in place at [my school],'' one principal wrote Bennett. ""We already use a curriculum similar to the one you propose,'' a Florida superintendent told Bennett, ""so I can certify

to you that 'IT WORKS!'''

Profiles of several excellent schools appear in this document. They prove that Bennett's proposals are possible and practical, and that they serve students from all kinds of homes, affluent and disadvantaged.

Bennett is not dictating to local schools which, he recognizes, must make the ultimate decisions. He is just exercising some leadership to raise our sights for quality education in the spirit of George Washington who said, ""Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair.''