Se to the NEWS

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CONSUMERISM AND EDUCATION

The proposed Consumer Protection Agency, which President Carter wants to set up in the Federal Government, is directed at the wrong target. The American private enterprise system produces a tremendous array of good products at reasonable prices that are the envy of the world.

The area where we need consumer advocacy is not in business, but in education. The quality of the product turned out by the public school system is diminishing as fast as its price is rising.

Educationists have tried to hide this academic deterioration by the techniques of passing pupils every year even though they do not pass the tests, by eliminating grades that record achievement, and by giving higher and higher grades each year (a phenomenon known as "grade inflation").

This is rationalized on the ground that a search for academic intellectual excellence is incompatible with democracy, and that academic elitism is repugnant to an egalitarian society.

It is encouraging to note that Graduation Day, 1976, has marked an eruption of protests from teachers, parents, and the media calling for remedial action. Not only do such articles bemo Yt.the fact that the reading of the classics has virtually dropped out of the public school curriculum, but a June article in Harper's Magazine even argues that "the only standard of performance that can sustain a free society is excel1ence" and that a "vision of excellence ... may be essential."

Such an article is long overdue. If we want the benefits of the technological age, we must stimulate the minds and develop the intellectual skills that enable

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bright men and women to design and butld the sophisticated products that make American living standards so much higher than any other country in the world.

Chicago District 9 Superintendent Albert A. Briggs has refused to graduate 675 eighth graders -- more than half of those under his jurisdiction -- because they can't read even at a fifth-grade level. His new policy is "read well or else" -- you can't graduate. He summed up the basis for his decision with one short sentence: "Reading is the key.[11]

Individual shortcomings are not usually the faultof that intangible mass called the "system." However, when children are allowed to grow up handicapped by a lack of reading skills, the school reading system is to blame.

In many big-city public school systems, students are tested for reading before they enter high school. If they can't read at the seventh-grade level, they are required to take remedial courses each year until they pass the test. But passing the test is not a requirement, either for entrance into or graduation from high school. Hundreds of high school seniors were graduated this month who can't read at the seventh-grade level.

The parents of a Florida girl have sued the school system to block her high school graduation, claiming that she has not been taught enough. In the absence of a consumer advocate to demand better quality in the teaching of reading, it is possible that more parents and students will appeal to the courts to force the schools to deliver the product for which the taxpayers are paying.

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