Answering Secretary Riley's Testimony

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Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley presented President Clinton's education initiatives to the House Education and Workforce Committee on March 5. Let's analyze his statement.

"Most of today's good jobs require more skills and training than a high school diploma affords." But that's not because jobs are more difficult; it's because public school curriculum content has been dumbed down so much that schools actually give high school diplomas to teenagers who can't read them.

"Every child in America should be able to read well and independently by the end of 3rd grade." No, every child should be able to read by the end of the first grade. If the goal is only to have children reading by the end of the third grade, then the taxpayers are paying $5,000+ per child per year for glorified baby-sitting in the first and second grades.

"Both the President and I firmly oppose any form of national control over schools and their curriculum." This obviously wasn't cleared with the White House. In a speech on January 22 to the Northbrook Area Schools Consortium, Clinton said: "We can no longer hide behind our love of local control of the schools."

"We will be proposing legislation that would help recruit and train one million volunteer tutors who would provide assistance after school, on weekends and during the summer to students who are behind in reading in pre-kindergarten through 4th grade. The bulk of the funds would go to broad-based local partnerships."

Since Clinton first broached this idea of one million volunteers, we've been curious as to why the National Education Association didn't rebuke him. After all, what could be a bigger insult to the teachers than for the President to say, in effect: Since you failed to teach nearly half of the children to read in three years of schooling, we're going to send in a million amateurs to do it.

Riley's statement makes it rather clear that the big teachers' union is swallowing the insult because Clinton's "America Reads" initiative will set up a new bureaucracy called "broad-based local partnerships." After all, more tax-paid jobs are what the union wants most of all.

It would be much more cost-efficient and parent-friendly if "America Reads" would simply offer a $500 tax credit to the parents of any child who enters the first grade already knowing how to read. What a wonderful incentive to parents to become involved with the education of their children! This would save so much taxpayers' money because the schools wouldn't waste the first three years in baby-sitting and then, after stigmatizing the child as "learning disabled," pay for a remedial reading bureaucracy.

"Results of the America Reads Challenge will be measured by student performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress' (NAEP) 4th grade reading test." How pitiful! This means that the illiterate children won't be discovered until the end of the 4th grade. It is a national scandal that the wonderful window of learning opportunity that six- and seven-year-olds have will remain closed, and the schools won't face up to their failure until the end of the fourth grade.

"We need to do a better job in recruiting the next generation of teachers." But Riley isn't going to "recruit" teachers; he just wants to "certify" teachers by "a system of national credentials." More federal control!

"We are asking for $620 million for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program . . . an increase of nearly 12 percent." Riley wants more money for one of the biggest boondoggles in the federal budget.

Billions of taxpayers' dollars have been wasted on this program over the last several years. But investigative studies by the General Accounting Office and by private research organizations and academicians have repeatedly reported that there is no replicable evidence that children who participate in these curricula are any less likely to do drugs than those who don't.

"Goals 2000 is all about high standards." Not true; Goals 2000 is all about federal mandates. It is shocking that not one of its eight national goals has anything to do with teaching elementary school children how to read.

"School-to-work links vocational training in the workplace to rigorous academic learning in the classroom." Absolutely false. School-to-work REPLACES rigorous academic learning with mandated vocational training.

"We want to make 14 years of education the standard in America." That makes no sense when 41 percent of those now entering universities must take remedial courses in reading and math. In other words, the taxpayers are paying a second time to teach those students what we already paid to have them taught in public schools.

Riley wants us to provide students who earn "at least a B minus grade point average" with tax credits. Here comes more grade inflation; from here on out, every student will get at least a B.

With colossal chutzpa, Riley ended by saying, "Politics must stop at the schoolhouse door." The Clinton-Riley education proposals are nothing but politics; they are either extravagant, or worthless, or obnoxious federal mandates that override local control. Republicans should laugh them out of town and develop their own education agenda.