PS1 for 3/2/89 # Minnesota School Survey Offends Parents

A questionnaire to be administered this month to thousands of Minnesota public school students has aroused opposition from parents who find it objectionable because it is privacy-invading and asks questions which assume that illegal drug use and promiscuity are normal teenage behavior. An even more serious objection is that it encourages children to inform on their parents.

The 149-question survey is being given to 6th, 9th and 12th grade pupils all over the state. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 114,187 survey booklets have already been mailed out, and at least 86 percent of the schools in Minnesota are expected to participate.

Here are the questions that induce children to inform on their parents' illegal or socially unacceptable behavior. "Has drinking by any family member repeatedly caused family, health, job or legal problems? If yes, who? (Mark all that apply.) Parent who lives with me, Parent who doesn't live with me, Brother and sister, Other relative, Other person who lives with me."

Another question reads, "Has drug use by any family member repeatedly caused family, health, job, or legal problems? If yes, who? (Mark all that apply.) Parent who lives with me, Parent who doesn't live with me, Brother or sister, Other relative, Other person who lives with me."

Those administering the questionnaire defend it by saying that the survey is anonymous and that no one will know how any particular child answers the questions. Parents are not so sure about this, since the questionnaire starts out with asking the child's sex, grade, age, race, height and weight, which, taken together, would enable a teacher to identify any child in her class.

Parents are being told that participation in the survey is voluntary, and that, if they wish, they may come to the school and read it in advance. However, prior parental consent is not being asked, as federal law (specifically, the Pupil Protection Amendment) requires for federally-funded materials which ask privacy-invading questions.

Those involved in the giving of the survey assert that it is made necessary by the provisions of the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1986, which requires the schools to describe the extent of drug and alcohol use in the school in order to receive funding for drug education, and also to track what the school is doing in order to continue to receive the funding. The law, however, says nothing about using a privacy-invading questionnaire, and the survey asks many questions that have nothing to do with drugs.

District Community Education Director Sharon Paulsen acknowledged to the **Winona Post** that the survey goes well beyond questions related to chemical abuse, but she said that the district "could make good use of this additional information in developing and monitoring family life and other curricula."

Some of the privacy-invading questions inquire about the child's religion. For example, question 20 asks "How often do you attend religious services?" The multiple-choice answers are "Never, Once or twice a month, Rarely, About once a week or more."

A follow up questions 21 asks, “How important is religion in your life?” The child can answer “Not important, A little important, Pretty important, [or] Very important.”

Then there are the depressing questions, the mere pondering of which would be traumatic for some children. Question 33 gives the child the statement, “I feel I do not have much to be proud of,” and asks him to respond with “Disagree, Mostly Disagree, Mostly Agree, [or] Agree.”

Similar depressing questions which the child is told to say whether he agrees or disagrees with are: “Sometimes I think that I am no good; I feel that my life is not very useful; Have you felt so discouraged or hopeless that you wondered if anything was worthwhile?” One of the multiple-choice responses is, “Extremely so, to the point that I have just about given up.”

After that series of downers, then the poor child is asked, “Have you ever tried to kill yourself?” Another question is, “During the last 12 months, how often have you run away from home?” The answers to that question are: “Never, Once or twice, 3 to 5 times, 6 to 10 times, More than 10 times.”

Then come the many questions which convey the notion that the majority of teenagers are using illegal drugs and are sexually promiscuous. “If you use marijuana, how old were you when you started? If you use any other drug, how old were you when you started? How often do you get drunk?”

Here are the personal sex questions. “Have you ever had sexual intercourse (gone all the way)? If you have sexual intercourse, how often do you and/or your partner use any birth control method? Have you been pregnant?”

It sound as if the Minnesota schools are doing too much Peeping Tomism. Why aren’t they concentrating on teaching children to read?