Why the Push for

Federal Control of the Classroom?

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The same Hillary Rodham Clinton/Marc Tucker/Ira Magaziner/Robert Reich legislation to merge the functions of the Departments of Education and Labor, which Congress declined to pass last year, is back under a new label and rushing to a House vote within two weeks. Now called the Employment, Training and Literacy Enhancement Act of 1997, H.R. 1385, it is a reincarnation of what last year was called Workforce Development in the Senate bill and CAREERS in the House bill.

The curious effort to combine the funding and functions of the Departments of Education and Labor is part of the plan to use the schools to serve the needs of the workforce instead of to educate children. The plan has been extensively described by Marc Tucker and his National Center on Education and the Economy, whose letterhead boasts Hillary Rodham Clinton, Ira Magaziner and David Rockefeller Jr.

Why a Republican Congress would want to give any control of public school curriculum, or of federal education funds, to Labor Secretaries Robert Reich or Alexis Herman is a mystery.

H.R. 1385 would establish Local Workforce Development Boards composed of a "majority" of businessmen plus token representatives of schools, colleges and community organizations. These unelected boards, controlled by the Governor under federal regulations, would be the gatekeepers for the School-to-Work system authorized by the 1994 federal law of that name.

Each Local Workforce Development Board would submit to the Governor "a comprehensive 3-year strategic local plan" to identify local industries, job seekers, workers, training delivery systems, and "the roles of individual employment." The Board would provide "a description of the steps the local board will take to work with local educational agencies [i.e., the schools] . . . to address local employment, education, and training needs."

Spending "such sums as necessary," these Local Workforce Development Boards are authorized to decide which training programs will qualify as "full service eligible providers," and link training services to "occupations for which there is a demand in the local workforce development area." The notion that a government board can determine what jobs will be in demand in the future is the dangerous illusion of

Robert Reich and others in the Clinton Administration who admire countries where economic czars control national industrial policy.

H.R. 1385 would finance computer inputing of students' personal data through the Labor Market Information Programs. H.R. 1385 would give the Secretary of Labor powers to coordinate and develop "a nationwide system of labor exchange services for the general public, provided as part of the full service employment and training delivery systems of the States."

H.R. 1385 would establish a National Institute for Literacy to "coordinate literacy services" under "an interagency agreement entered into by the Secretary of Education with the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Health and Human Services."

Literacy, as redefined by education establishment, has become the trendy jargon word of the moment. Literacy doesn't mean being able to read your high school diploma; H.R. 1385 defines literacy as being able "to function on the job."

While H.R. 1385 is being marketed as "job training," it proposes to spend a lot of money "to make sustainable changes in a family." That sounds more like parent training than job training.

H.R. 1385 would provide funds for grants and contracts for "Family Literacy Services," defined in the bill as "training for parents on how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children." But who is the other partner? The village? The federal government?

H.R. 1385 would create a new type of corporate welfare: taxpayer dollars for "skills upgrading" for those already employed. This probably explains why so many businessmen think "workforce development" is a neat idea, but there is no indication that the taxpayers are eager to assume employers' costs of training workers for upgraded jobs.

The unions aren't objecting to this cozy relationship with business because H.R. 1385 would also hand out tax dollars to labor unions for "research and demonstration projects." Goodies for everyone are designed to buy off all organized groups while the feds move us toward a nationally planned economy.

Youths deemed disadvantaged would be given "employment opportunities that are directly linked to

academic, occupational, and work based learning opportunities." This would leverage job placement right into school curriculum, under the supervision of the Workforce Development Boards.

It's bad enough that H.R. 1385 would reauthorize billions of dollars for job training programs that the General Accounting Office has branded a failure. But it's downright ominous the way this bill centralizes power over education in the federal Departments of Labor and Education, the Governors and their appointees, thereby bypassing elected school boards and state legislators.

Where are Republican Members of Congress who will stand up and remind us that the era of Big Government is over?