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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

"Do you believe in research?" With a trace of hostility, that question was asked at a recent academic forum. "Of course, I believe in research," I replied. "A writer simply must believe in research."

"Or, do you mean research on subjects of your choice with my tax dollars?" I countered. Indeed, that's exactly what the questioner did mean. He used a typical liberal sleight-of-word tactic to paint anyone who objects to wasteful government spending as being anti-intellectual or anti-education.

These questions touch the core of the matter of additional appropriations for the National Institute of Education. President Reagan's Office of Management and Budget and Domestic Council staff have both proposed that NIE be phased out. It is the logical place to save tax funds, and the time to start is now.

In a television speech in May 1982, President Reagan asked the American people for suggestions on how he could cut the size of the Federal Government. Ed Curran, who was Reagan's director of NIE, responded by suggesting that his own agency be abolished. Somehow, in the hoopla that followed, Ed Curran was "abolished" while NIE remained.

NIE supporters have been trying to convey the incredible notion that, if NIE fails to get its customary appropriation, education research will come to a halt. That's nothing but the arrogance of the federal bureaucrats who believe that America is a unit of space bounded by federal tax dollars, and that all important ideas lie within.

Education research flourished long before NIE was created, and will continue to flourish long after NIE is gone. More than 400 U.S. colleges and universities have education departments. They grant thousands of advanced degrees every year. Most post-graduate degree recipients must write a dissertation or thesis in order to qualify for their degrees. They could do the education research we need; it wouldn't cost the taxpayers anything, and the degree recipients would be rewarded by knowing that their work would be useful.

Scores of universities publish journals, periodicals and books. Thousands more

qualified academic staff and students are trying to get their articles printed than there are pages to print them on. Those publications are a splendid vehicle to stimulate needed research and to publish the best.

The SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Tests) declined for 19 straight years. Scores showed a slight upturn this year, but one swallow does not a summer make. Every employer knows that schools are graduating students who can't read or write. Most large employers, from city banks to the All Volunteer Army, have been compelled to put in their own training program to teach new employees what they didn't learn in the early elementary grades.

No evidence exists that government "research" through NIE has had any worthwhile impact. In fact, most observers believe that NIE funds are spent, as David Lambro said in his book "Fat City," on "vague, often esoteric research and experimental education projects which have nothing whatosever to do with the everyday reality of educating our children."

Myron Lieberman, a former consultant to the U.S. Office of Education and former supporter of increased funding for NIE, has become convinced that "the research is largely useless for any purpose except showing that more research is needed." The first commandment of the bureaucracy is always to perpetuate and expand its own functions.

Do we really need an NIE $99,000 survey on the political attitudes of college professors, or a $37,000 study of the 1973 New York City School Board elections? Must we spend tax dollars on a television series explicitly designed to change children's values about traditional sex roles? Those are some of the questions Ed Curran asked in his letter to President Reagan.

Curran also pointed out that NIE's "research" on desegregation has consistently been tilted toward the pro-busing, pro-reverse discrimination point of view. It hardly qualifies for the name "research" when the results of the research are stipulated in advance.

When Ed Curran was summoned to the office of his boss, Education Secretary Terrel Bell, Curran was asked the question, "How can you head an agency which you think should not exist?" The answer is easy. Terrel Bell himself heads an agency which Ronald Reagan thinks should not exist, and if Secretary Bell doesn't agree, the real question is, "How can he hold his job?"