P.S. to the NEWS
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REPORT CARD ON SCHOOLS

The Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) are supposed to be a kind of a report card on the aptitude/achievement of college-bound high school students. Even more, they are a report card on the schools themselves.

The 1980 SAT scores dropped again for the seventeenth straight year, and teachers and school administrators have begun their annual series of excuses and explanations for why today's high school seniors have learned less in school than last year's crop, and much less than those of the decade before.

The steady drop in verbal scores from 478 in 1963 to 424 this year, and in math from 502 in 1963 to 466 this year, is a source of embarrassment to educators who are now trying to claim that the scores don't measure students' academic ability or the quality of the schools. But that's exactly what the scores should measure and, if they don't, then why take them?

The argument is made that the drop in SAT scores is because so many more economically disadvantaged youths are now taking them and heading for college. However, only about two-thirds of college students took the SAT, and the College Board estimates that, if all took them, the average scores would be signicantly lower, namely, 368 in verbal and 402 in math.

It is probable that the real problem is not so much what students didn't learn in high school, but what they didn't learn in the first grade. What they should have learned in the first grade was how to read.

It didn't seem so important to learn to read in the first grade because children get promoted to the second grade whether they can read or not. That's under strange theories of the educationists such as social promotions and getting the child to accommodate himself to the group rather than learning basic skills.

But if the student either can't read or can't read well at age 18 to 20, he is

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permanently handicapped. For an increasing percentage of young people, the inability to read means that they cannot even get a job.

To the kind of people who have brought us to this sorry state of learning, there is only one solution: big federal money for new and bigger federal programs. More than $20 billion has been spent by the federal government on "compensatory" education in elementary schools since 1965.

But that hasn't solved the problem. In some cities, 68 percent of the students reach high school reading two years or more below grade level. "About one-third of our youth are ill-educated, ill-employed, and ill-equipped to make their way in American society," warned the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education in 1979.

In the face of such failure, the same people keep demanding more new federal programs. They are now supporting President Carter's proposed $2 billion youth and education employment program.

Half of the money would go to pay salaries, naturally. The other half would be spent on programs "to fill the huge gaps in achievement that have left youngsters unable to handle the studies normally expected of high school students."

Supposedly, the genesis of the new program was the discovery of the remarkable fact that unemployment difficulties are related to deficiencies in schooling, and that the ability to read, write, add and subtract are necessary to marketable job skills. So the plan is to use career motivation in order to teach reading to high school students who can't read.

Logic tells these agents of the bureaucracy that teaching students to read involves the same methods whether the student is age 6 or 16. But it isn't so. The child has an eagerness to learn at age 6 which diminishes with each passing year. When year after school year passes in useless busy-work without learning basic skills, the student becomes frustrated and almost unteachable.

Besides, there is no reason to think that a new $2 billion program can do at the high school level what many more billions have been unable to do for the same youngsters in the previous eight to ten years.

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