PS1 for 10/8/87#THE PUSH FOR A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The power to prescribe a national curriculum for American public school students is the power to control the next generation. The prevailing consensus in America is that nobody should ever exercise such power because that would be incompatible with the survival of liberty.

This is why we have accorded the precept called ""local control of schools'' a preeminent place in our society. This is why, when federal spending on education began, restrictions were written into the law to prevent Big Brother from exercising control over the content of what he was funding.

The General Education Provisions Act, which covers all U.S. Department of Education activities, prohibits the Federal Government from exercising any ""direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration or personnel of any educational institution, school or school system.''

For the past 20 years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), operating on a mix of federal and foundation funding, has tested a nationally representative sample of school children in academic and values/attitude areas. Like the SAT scores, NAEP's results record a depressing decline in academic achievement.

NAEP is presently seeking an expansion of its budget from $4 million to $26 million a year in order to vastly increase not only the number of children tested, but also the number of subject areas tested. This proposed six-fold expansion of NAEP was recommended in (BF)The Nation's Report Card,(end BF) a lengthy report on NAEP prepared by a Study Group chaired by former Governor of Tennessee Lamar Alexander.

The Alexander report recognized that ""there has long been a concern that any sort of nationwide assessment program would somehow

generate a single national curriculum for all schools and all schoolchildren -- something that many Americans would find objectionable.'' But, the report gratuitously (and falsely) concluded, ""many of these concerns are less important now than they were previously.''

Translated from education jargon, that means the education bureaucracy hopes that the well-publicized news about declining test scores and our millions of functional illiterates has convinced the American people that the Federal Government should play the central role in American education. This implies federal control of technology not only to teach students what the government decides are essential subjects and values, but to use technology to ""manage'' education through the massive collection of data on academic achievement and on students', parents', and teachers' personal habits, traits, and values.

The Alexander report strongly urged that NAEP ""make the evaluation of higher-order thinking a central concern of future assessments,'' and that ""NAEP channel additional resources into developing ways to identify and measure the higher processes of thinking and learning.'' The Study Group report stated that ""the development of skilled and flexible thinking does not need to wait upon the mastery of more 'basic' or 'fundamental' skills grounded in rote memorization.''

That statement proves that NAEP's goal is to teach ""flexible thinking'' and value-free decision-making even when the child lacks the basics such as reading and fundamental knowledge about objective facts.

Such a blatant admission of what NAEP plans to do in the area of higher-order thinking is understandable when one considers Professor Benjamin Bloom's definition of the purpose of education and of good

teaching. A highly influential figure in U.S. education, Bloom said: ""The purpose of education is to change the thoughts, feelings and actions of students,'' and he defined good teaching as ""challenging the students' fixed beliefs.''

The Alexander report also urged NAEP to survey background information about the pupils and their family and home life, all of which is none of the Federal Government's business. Such privacy-invading data collection would aid in the continuing redesign of education programs to accomplish predetermined government goals in academic and value/attitude areas.

The argument is made that we need vastly increased testing in order to acquire valid state-by-state comparisons of educational progress (or lack of progress). The subsequent competition among states is predicted to produce better results.

But at what price? The power to write the national test is the power to control the curriculum because schools will ""teach to the test'' in order to make a good showing. This process will make local control a thing of the past and dictate a national curriculum in all public schools in America's 15,500 school districts.