Confrontation with Clinton over National Testing

October 8, 1997

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President Clinton thinks he's on the popular side in drawing a line in the sand about his plan for national tests. He's wrong; he has misjudged the issue.

Senator John Ashcroft has taken up the challenge, promising a filibuster. He already has 26 Senators signed up to join him.

Ashcroft argues that, "Once the Federal Government is using tests to shape curriculum, parental control through local school boards will be doomed." Parents don't like the smell of that plan.

Parents know intuitively what the Clinton Administration is trying to hide: that national tests and national standards inevitably mean a national curriculum. There is no way, academically, ethically or legally, that children can be given a valid test without first teaching them the subject matter to be tested.

Clinton wants to spend millions of dollars to test the reading skills of fourth graders, but we already know, as he told us many times during his 1996 campaign, that 40 percent of third graders can't read. Children ought to be taught how to read in the first grade and, if they're not, any talk about "high standards" is a deception because we've already succumbed to social promotion.

Clinton's eighth grade math test is just as controversial. Some want to allow contestants to use calculators and some don't.

The problem isn't that children aren't tested enough, it's that they aren't taught how to read, write and calculate. Furthermore, our country has an abundance of available privately produced tests, probably better tests than the bureaucrats would write.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests show that only 28 percent of fourth graders read at a "proficient" level. The NAEP tests even give us comparative figures for individual states.

There's another problem connected with tests. Recent big front-page spreads in both the Wall St. Journal and the New York Times have revealed that cheating on tests is a national scandal, and that cheating is rampant not only among students, but among teachers.

The news gets worse. The nation's biggest testing company, Educational Testing Service (ETS) knows that widespread cheating is going on but doesn't make any big deal about it. ETS boasts that it is "relying on the world's largest honor system."

It's unlikely that a majority of test-takers honor the honor system any more. After a generation of values clarification teaching in the public schools, a large percentage of students and teachers now believe that cheating, lying and stealing are OK if you feel comfortable with such actions.

The New York Times reported that a 145-question test, complete with answers, had circulated freely among teachers ahead of time for several years, and ETS knew it. ETS seems to think that cheating is just part of the cost of doing business.

That's like the attitude of the shops in big-city malls that don't report crime and shoplifting, fearful that it will drive away customers. They just look upon it as a cost of doing business.

Everything Clinton says about "high standards" is so phony. Out of one side of his mouth, the Clinton Administration promotes School-to-Work, which means putting schoolchildren on vocational training tracks selected by workforce development boards with school counselors and computers.

The rationale for this enhanced voc ed (vocational education) usually goes like this: 60 percent of high schoolers won't attend college and we have to train them to compete in the global economy.

At the same time, Clinton demands that it become the American norm for every student to have two years of college. Clinton has budgeted lots of new money to provide tuition tax credits to give everyone two years of college.

Clinton has made emotional pleas on television about his goal of sending every teenager to college, presenting this as though it were a civil right and, of course, a personal gift from Clinton, since he's going to ram though big new increases in the $43 billion in federal college aid to 7.6 million students that the taxpayers are already providing.

Yet, the Department of Education reports that about 29 percent of freshmen take at least one course in remedial reading, writing or math. Shockingly, 78 percent of all two- and four-year colleges offer remedial courses.

Why are we being forced to pay the bills to send teenagers to send kids to college who can't do college work? If Clinton were honest about wanting "high standards," he would require that entrants into college be able to do college work.