

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.

"Without vision, the people perish."

Why the Latest Campaign Against Illiteracy Will Fail

Everyone who reads newspapers or watches TV is now aware that illiteracy is a major growing problem in America. In fact, the business community, worried about our economic competitiveness, is so alarmed that it is organizing all sorts of seminars and symposiums to deal with the problem. The latest such symposium took place in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 8. It was sponsored by the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the International Reading Association.

Anyone who knows anything about the International Reading Association (IRA) knows that this organization of professors and teachers of reading and editors of basal reading programs, is the chief cause of the problem. To expect the IRA to help solve the illiteracy problem is like asking the Mafia to help solve the problem of crime. The IRA is responsible for institutionalizing the educational malpractice that passes for reading instruction in American schools. It has a strong vested interest in maintaining the very teaching methods that produce functional illiteracy.

Incredible? Perhaps. But we can prove it.

Americans first found out about this malpractice in 1955 when Rudolf Flesch, in his famous book, Why Johnny Can't Read, told the American people:

"The teaching of reading -- all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks -- is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

He then explained how in the early 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out the alphabetic phonics method, which is the proper way to teach children to read an alphabetic writing system, and put in a new whole-word, look-say, or sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Flesch explained that when you impose an ideographic teaching technique on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability.

Flesch, incidentally, was not the first to discover this. Back in 1929, Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist at Iowa State University, reached the same conclusion after diagnosing many children with reading problems. In

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fact, he wrote an article about it which appeared in the Feb. 1929 issue of the Journal of Educational Psychology entitled, "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability." Dr. Orton wrote:

"I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the use of the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life."

One-Third Doomed to Failure

Today we know that the "considerable size" Dr. Orton referred to is about one-third of the total student population. In other words, one-third of the three million children who entered first grade this September will emerge from their education 12 years from now functionally illiterate!

Is there a way to prevent this terrible tragedy from occurring? Yes. But it would require our state legislatures to mandate the teaching of intensive, systematic phonics in the first grade as the sole method of teaching children to read. If this simple step were taken, we would stop adding one million new functional illiterates each year to the ranks of those already in the underclass.

Will this be done? Not if the IRA and the rest of the education establishment have their way. Their hostility to intensive, systematic phonics is not to be believed. Why? That's a good question for the businessmen to ask the educators.

Of course, the professors and teachers of reading will insist that they do teach phonics and that the teaching-methods controversy is old history and no longer relevant. But those of us in the field who have been teaching functional illiterates for years know that the professors and their colleagues are lying. They teach phonetic clues and incidental phonics in the context of a sight program, not intensive, systematic phonics. They rely on sight vocabularies, picture clues, configuration clues, and context clues -- all part and parcel of the sight method.

The Debate Rages On

In fact, the debate over methods is as relevant today as ever, and the illiteracy problem will not be solved until those who genuinely want to solve it come to the realization that the teaching methods controversy is at the very heart of the issue.

Indeed, if the businessmen wish, the controversy can be settled quickly and easily: simply permit the proponents of intensive, systematic phonics to implement their reading program in one primary school anywhere in the U.S. and let's look at the results. This writer would be willing to do it at no cost to the taxpayer or the businessmen.

Is it a deal? Are there any takers? We know of many good teachers of reading who would join us in this demonstration.

Whether the businessmen and newspaper publishers know it or not, they are being had by the professors of education and the IRA. Many assume that the rich and powerful are informed enough to avoid such traps and pitfalls. Unfortunately, such is not the case. No one less than John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was taken to the cleaners by the educators at Teachers College, Columbia University, when he was persuaded to donate \$3-million to their experimental Lincoln School, which then

turned three of his sons into functional illiterates.

As Santayana once said, those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it.

Sixty Million Functional Illiterates

Arthur O. Sulzberger, publisher of the N.Y. Times and chairman of the publishers association, opened the Washington symposium by praising the growing number of organizations dedicated to "turning the tide in the national effort to improve literacy."

"Today up to 60 million Americans -- one third of the adult population -- cannot read their local newspaper," he said, "As we edge closer to the 21st century, life is becoming more complex and will become more difficult for adults who cannot read."

Mr. Sulzberger cited data from the Hudson Institute estimating that by the year 2000 the percentage of new jobs falling into "low skill" categories will drop to 27 percent from the current level of 40 percent. "Yet, even as we are aware of the problem, adult illiteracy continues to grow," he said.

What was the result of the symposium? A Working Group on Adult Literacy was created to focus attention on the extent to which millions of Americans lack basic reading and writing skills and to develop a consensus on how to fight the problem.

More Money Needed

In its proposal for a national policy, the Working Group called for a doubling of Federal appropriations from \$135 million to \$270 million to fight illiteracy. It also urged that the next President make the literacy problem a theme of his State of the Union Message and "explain the clear linkages between literacy and other issues, such as welfare dependency, parenting skills,

crime, international competitiveness, productivity and job creation."

The Working Group also proposed the creation of a National Institute for Adult Literacy modeled after the National Science Foundation, eligible to receive both public and private money. It would conduct applied research on effective ways to fight illiteracy, make the flow of information about the subject easier and provide training for state, local and private organizations.

And who do you think would run the National Institute for Adult Literacy? Probably all of those bona fide members of the reading establishment who have brought us to the present disaster.

The Working Group urged an initial Federal appropriation of \$12 million for the institute and said that, with the addition of state, local and private resources, it "could operate at a level of about \$20 million a year." (N.Y. Times, 9/9/88)

Comment:

Hey, guys, I'll show you how to solve the problem for \$20,000. If that's too much, I'll do it free of charge. Is it a deal?

How to Solve the Illiteracy Problem

We have been advised by our friends abroad that if America wants to solve its illiteracy problem, it must do the following:

1. Mandate compulsory school attendance for all children. (Done!)
2. Provide free public schools in every city, town, and hamlet in America. (Done!)
3. Provide bus transportation to schools in rural areas. (Done!)
4. Create a state department of public instruction to supervise the public schools. (Done!)

5. Establish teachers colleges to train qualified teachers. (Done!)

6. Provide a system of teacher certification to make sure that only qualified persons become teachers. (Done!)

7. Organize educators professionally in order to maintain approved standards of instruction. (Done!)

8. Organize teachers into unions so that they will be paid adequate salaries. (Done!)

9. Organize teachers politically so that they can force legislators to increase funding for education. (Done!)

10. Institute federal programs to help culturally deprived children get a head start and succeed. (Done!)

11. Provide federally funded compensatory programs to help children from poor families. (Done!)

12. Provide Special Education for children with learning problems. (Done!)

13. Create a federal Department of Education with a cabinet level Secretary to elevate education to the highest level of national concern. (Done!)

14. Provide funds for educational labs and research projects to improve education. (Done!)

15. Get business leaders involved in solving the problem of illiteracy. (Done!)

16. Inform the public of the seriousness of the illiteracy problem. (Done!)

17. Get newspaper publishers and television stations involved in finding solutions to the illiteracy problem. (Done!)

18. Establish a federally funded Right-to-Read program with the stated

goal of wiping out illiteracy in ten years. (Done by Pres. Nixon!)

19. Organize pressure groups to force the government to spend more money on the illiteracy problem. (Being done!)

20. Create a federally funded National Institute to deal exclusively with adult illiteracy. (Being done!)

21. Mandate the teaching of intensive, systematic phonics in the first grade of all primary schools. (Not done, and probably will never be done! Why? Because it will make most of the other things on this list unnecessary!)

California Kids to Get More Look-Say In Primary Schools

Functional illiteracy will be booming in California in the years ahead if that state adopts the look-say basal reading programs it has already approved. The adoptions will be confirmed by the state's Board of Education in October.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Holt, Rinehart & Winston have won approval for three complete kindergarten-to-eighth grade series of readers. Both reading programs were on Rudolf Flesch's "dismal dozen" list of look-say basals.

Others approved for complete K-8 readers were Heath, Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan, McGraw-Hill, and Scott, Foresman. Neither Heath nor McGraw-Hill were on Flesch's list.

Open Court, the best known and highly respected phonics-oriented basal reading program, was rejected. Francie Alexander, California's curricular director, says the commission rejected some Open Court readers because their stories were seen as sacrificing students' reading interest for the sake of teaching phonics!

Mr. Honig Asks for Money

Some industry officials also are upset at the timing of solicitations for money from California School Superintendent Bill Honig. Mr. Honig phoned several publishers last spring, after many new books were already finished, seeking contributions to Californians for Quality Government, a group campaigning for a failed initiative on the June ballot that would have allowed more state educational funding. Mr. Honig, an elected official, was chairman of the group and often has raised money for such educational causes in the state. Harcourt and its units contributed \$50,000. The publishing industry's California political-action committee gave \$10,000.

Some publishers, especially smaller houses, felt Harcourt's contribution was an unusually large one they couldn't match. "Some people in the industry think that Harcourt's getting three series was a result of their giving \$50,000," says Andre Carus, president of Open Court. Harcourt and Mr. Honig deny this. Mr. Honig says he "wasn't any part" of the adoption process and has spoken to no one who was involved with the materials submitted.

Mr. Honig says some publishers may be criticizing his solicitations to divert attention from their own shortcomings. (Wall Street Journal, 7/27/88)

Comment:

It is obvious that Mr. Honig's devotion to educational excellence is somewhat lacking when it comes to beginning reading instruction. He should know by now that reading disability and functional illiteracy start in the primary grades and are caused by the look-say teaching methods. This has been known by the public since 1955 and by the professionals since 1929. If Mr. Honig and Francie Alexander don't know it yet, then they are not qualified to be in charge of California's public education.

Because of textbook selection decisions based on ignorance, millions of California children will be condemned to lives as functional illiterates. Such state sanctioned educational malpractice will be doing more damage to more lives than one can possibly calculate.

It is heartening that the electorate in California rejected Mr. Honig's initiative that would have allowed more state educational funding. Undoubtedly the funds would have been used to purchase more educational malpractice.

What all of this tells us is that public education cannot be reformed in a manner to serve the best interests of the children. All of the reforms simply improve the lot of teachers, administrators, bureaucrats, and publishers.

And so if parents in California want to make sure that their children learn to read, they will have to teach them at home or place them in private or religious schools with good phonics reading programs.

In Selma, California, They Teach Real Phonics

Selma, California, is a small town of about 7,500 people in the San Joaquin Valley, 15 miles south of Fresno. Many of the children in the town's schools are from migrant worker families. For years, Selma's primary schools taught children to read by way of the look-say basal programs provided by the state.

Several years ago a third-grade teacher discovered that more than half her class couldn't read. She began to hunt around for a reading program that would help the children learn. She found one: "Sing, Spell and Read," an intensive phonics program created by Sue Dickson, a New Jersey first-grade

teacher. She bought it with her own money, used it, and found that all the children could learn to read with this program.

Peggy Adams, principal of the Washington Elementary School, decided to use the program with her first-graders. The results were dramatic. In 1980 only 30 percent of Selma's first-graders were reading at or above grade level. In 1985, 83 percent of Peggy's first-graders were above the 50th percentile on the California Achievement Test. What is even more remarkable is that 50 percent of Peggy's first-graders began school with no knowledge of English!

What does this prove? That California's hispanic children can learn to read English well, provided they are taught with an intensive, systematic phonics program.

Adams says that although the students' reading test scores have risen dramatically, the real measure of the program's success is the children's attitude toward reading.

"These children enjoy looking at books and listening to someone read," says Adams. "They are constantly going to the library and getting books to read. We don't buy the kinds of books that schools normally buy. We buy the kinds that parents would. They take the books home and try to get their parents or brothers and sisters to read. Often they succeed where no one else has been able to before."

Since "Sing, Spell and Read" is not on the state-approved list of textbooks, the district has had to absorb its full cost. In 1984 the district's Board of Trustees put its stamp of approval on the program and it was adopted district-wide. (The Selma Enterprise, 1/9/86)

Comment:

About two years ago we stopped in at the Washington Elementary School in Selma and visited with Peggy Adams. We

were delighted to meet this champion of intensive phonics. In the course of the conversation, Peggy told us something very interesting. She said that when she was in teachers college she was told by her professor of reading to expect that one third of her future pupils would never learn to read, a second third would become passable readers, and that only a third would become proficient readers. She was told that these were the facts of life, and that nothing could be done about it.

Today Peggy knows that what her professor told her was true only for children taught to read by look-say basal programs. When taught by intensive, systematic phonics, all children learn to read.

We don't know if Mr. Honig or Francie Alexander have heard of what is going on in Selma. Perhaps we ought not to tell them. They're liable to put a stop to it!

P.S. We've known Sue Dickson for many years through our mutual participation in the Reading Reform Foundation. Her reading program is now available through CBN University, Virginia Beach, VA 23463.

Spending on Education at Record Levels

According to the U.S. Dept. of Education's annual forecast, spending on education during the 1988-89 school year will rise by 6.2 percent to reach a record total of \$328 billion.

Of that, \$196 billion will be spent on elementary and secondary education, public and private, and \$132 billion will pay for postsecondary education. The expenditure for precollegiate education represents a 26 percent increase over the 1980-81 outlay of \$183 billion, adjusted for inflation.

Enrollment in elementary and secondary schools will reach 46 million, about 80,000 higher than last

year. Elementary enrollment will be 1.4 percent higher than last year, while secondary enrollment will be down 2.8 percent.

The average spending for each student in public elementary and secondary schools will be \$4,810.

About 2.7 million teachers will be employed in elementary and secondary schools with an average salary of \$29,573 for those in the public sector. (Educ. Wk. 9/7/88)

Comment:

In 1978 the public schools educated 48 million students at a cost of \$86 billion. In 1988-89, 46 million students will be educated at a cost of \$196 billion, an over \$100 billion increase in ten years. And in those ten years public education has become a disaster. Perhaps with less money the results would not have been as bad!

Despite the fact that education expenditures have increased on the average of about \$10 billion a year since 1978, the NEA would have us believe that the Reagan administration has virtually starved the educators and deprived American children of just about everything. The truth is that the U.S. Dept. of Education's budget has increased each year, and during the Reagan years average teacher pay has gone from \$18,568 in 1980 to \$29,573 in 1988. But you wouldn't know it if you listened to Mary Futrell, professional chronic bellyacher.

Alabama Approves Evolution But Prohibits Creationism

The Alabama State Board of Education has unanimously decided that high-school biology teachers can use the term "evolution" in class. Previously, the course of study used by teachers referred only to "species modification."

The board instructed teachers to include "scientific theories of the origin of life and evolution" in all high-school biology courses. Instructors will continue to be prohibited from teaching the biblical story of creation, according to State Superintendent of Education Wayne Teague. (Educ. Wk. 9/7/88)

Comment:

How's that for academic freedom!

Teenage Suicide Attempts Increase

Thirty percent of high-achieving teenagers have considered suicide and 4 percent have tried it, according to a poll released 9/12/88. The number of teenagers who considered suicide climbed from 28 to 30 percent since 1984 and the incidence of attempting it increased from 3 to 4 percent during the same period, said the "Who's Who Among American High School Students 19th Annual Survey of High Achievers."

Both figures are the highest since the survey started tracking suicide questions four years ago. The poll, taken last spring, said blacks are at particular risk, noting that 10 percent of black high-achievers said they had tried suicide. (Boston Globe, 9/13/88)

In a survey funded by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, about 40 percent of the girls and 25 percent of the boys polled said they had "seriously thought" about committing suicide. Nearly 20 percent of the girls and 10 percent of the boys said they had attempted suicide. (Educ. Wk. 9/7/88)

Shocking Survey on School Crime Released

According to the National Adolescent Student Health survey released in August, more than one-third of the

11,000 adolescents polled were threatened, robbed, or attacked at school in 1986. Such incidents resulted in physical injury to a student more than a third of the time.

The survey provides a shocking picture of the severity of crime in and around the classroom. Funded by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, the study was based on the written responses of 8th and 10th graders in more than 200 schools in 20 states. The survey found that:

Forty-nine percent of boys and 28 percent of girls had been in at least one fight during the past year involving physical force or a weapon.

Nearly one in five girls -- 18 percent -- reported that someone had tried to force them to have sex against their will.

Forty-one percent of boys and 24 percent of girls said they could obtain a handgun if they wanted to.

Twenty-three percent of boys said they had carried a knife to school at least once during the school year, and 7 percent said they carried one daily.

Among boys questioned, 3 percent had carried a handgun to school once in 1987, and 1 percent said they carried one to school daily.

Schools Are Dangerous

Extrapolating from these figures, Ronald W. Garrison of the National School Safety Center offered estimates of the total level of crime among the 13.5 million students in secondary schools last year.

He calculated that in 1987:

-- 6.6 million boys and 3.7 million girls were involved in a fight.

-- 5 million students were threatened with harm, and 1.7 million were attacked.

-- Nearly 2 million students were robbed.

-- More than 5.5 million boys and 3.2 million girls had access to handguns.

-- 945,000 boys carried a knife to school daily, and 135,000 boys carried a gun to school daily.

Mr. Garrison said that the statistics provide support for "what we've been hearing from police and school officials -- the ages of the kids as offenders are going down, and the offenses are getting worse."

The survey's findings are supported by some little-noticed statistics released last spring by the U.S. Census Bureau in its National Crime Survey. These statistics indicate that 12- to 19-year-olds are more likely to be victims of crime and violence than any other segment of the population. For example:

-- One in six youths was the victim of street crime, compared with about one in nine adults.

-- One of every 18 young people were assaulted, robbed, or raped in 1986, more than double the rate for adults. Of the estimated 1.6 million attempted or completed crimes against juveniles, 40,000 were rapes, 230,000 were robberies, 450,000 were aggravated assaults, and 875,000 were simple assaults.

-- Only about one-third of all violent crimes committed against youths were reported to police.

The findings of the National Crime Survey will be supplemented in early 1989 by a new study measuring young people's perceptions of crime and safety in the nation's schools. (Educ. Wk. 9/7/88)

PURE Seminar

Tulsa, OK, Fri Sept 30 - Sat Oct 1.
Holiday Inn I-244 at Garnett Rd.
Speakers include: Samuel Blumenfeld,
Sharon Pangelinan and Glen Ellis.
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