

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 these risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

U.S Government Reveals: 90 Million American Adults Can Barely Read or Write

Nearly half of all adult Americans read and write so poorly that it is difficult for them to hold a decent job, according to the most comprehensive literacy study done by the U.S. Education Department. For instance, the most difficult tasks that an estimated 90 million adults can perform include calculating the difference in price of two items and filling out a Social Security form. These adults cannot write a brief letter explaining an error on a credit-card bill, figure out a Saturday departure on a bus schedule, or use a calculator to determine the difference between a sale price and a regular price, the study said.

"This should be a wake-up call for all Americans to consider going back to school and getting a tune-up," said Education Secretary Richard W. Riley. "It paints a picture of a society in which the vast majority of Americans do not know that they do not have the skills they need to earn a living in our increasingly technological society and international marketplace."

The \$14-million "Adult Literacy in America" study, conducted by the Educational Testing Service for the National Center for Education Statistics, was set in motion

by Congress five years ago. The conclusions underscore alarms raised in recent years by business leaders and education specialists alike about the literacy and quality of the American workforce and about millions of high-school students earning diplomas though barely able to read and write.

The study used a broad definition of literacy, attempting to assess adults' ability "to use printed and written information to function in society" as well as their capacity to perform everyday functions that involve simple arithmetic. As it conducted lengthy interviews with 26,000 adults in a dozen states, even some in prisons, it assigned a number value to everyday skills on a 500-point scale.

Some 40 million American adults earned a score between 0 and 225, meaning that they had only the most rudimentary reading and writing skills. For instance, they could locate the expiration date on a driver's license, but not an intersection on a simple city map. Of these adults with the lowest skills, one-quarter were born in another country, one-quarter reported some physical, mental or health condition, and one-half never finished high school. Minorities and poor people were

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disproportionately at the bottom. Half were white.

An additional 50 million adults fared a little better but were still considered to have inadequate reading and writing skills. They could not, for instance, use a calculator for basic addition.

Only 20% Highly Literate

One-third of all adults performed at middle level (scoring 276 to 325). Only about 20 percent—34 to 40 million—scored high, handling challenging tasks that involved complex documents and background information.

"I can't stress enough the importance of these findings," said Riley, who urged schools to improve, business to increase efforts at workplace training, and "parents to slow down in their lives to give their children's education more attention."

For years, business executives have said the low level of literacy among tens of millions of Americans was a direct threat to the U.S. economy. Secretary Riley and Labor Secretary Robert Reich have been warning of a further divided society, one where the educated get well-paying jobs and the rest have a hard time eking out a living.

American business has been paying dearly for the nation's literacy problems, said Keith Poston, spokesman for the National Alliance of Business, a group dedicated to public-education reform. It is not unusual for employers to "reject three out of four applications because they cannot read or write well enough to hold entry-level jobs. Half the applications are thrown in the trash."

"We are not talking about assembly-line jobs any more," said Poston, who said today's jobs require workers to read manuals, write, and interpret. The results of the survey, he said, "translate into low wages and lost jobs."

Businesses estimate they lose between \$25-billion to \$30-billion a year nationwide in lost productivity, errors and accidents attributable to poor literacy. "We have estimated that only about 25 percent of the adult population is highly literate," said Brenda Bell, vice president of marketing for the National Alliance of Business.

Irwin S. Kirsch, a principal author of the new report, said those scoring lowest in literacy were a diverse group of people and "that immigrant patterns do not account for this." They were less likely to vote and to read newspapers, and more likely to be unemployed. Their median pay was around \$245 a week.

At no time in American history have so many people earned high school and college degrees—leading many to describe the country as better educated than ever. However, according to this study, a diploma does not mean a person is functionally literate. More than half of high-school graduates were found to have restricted abilities in math and reading. Yet, the overwhelming majority of all Americans believe that they read and write "well" or "very well." (*Boston Globe*, 9/9/93; *USA Today*, 9/9/93; *NY Times*, 9/9/93; *Detroit News*, 9/9/93)

Comment:

At last, our own fat-headed government has provided the hard, irrefutable evidence that almost half of America's 191 million adults read and write so poorly that they are unable to function effectively in our high-tech economy. Yet, these functional illiterates were all educated at great expense in our government schools, spent more time in classrooms than any previous generation, and emerged from the process with virtually no employable skills. Secretary Riley's advice that they go back to school for a "tune-up" is tantamount to advising a malpractice victim to go back to the same doctor that botched the job to begin with.

Of course, we have been telling the public for years now, in print and on radio talk shows, that the cause of our literacy decline is the whole-word teaching method used in our primary grades. Rudolf Flesch, in 1955, wrote an incisive book about the subject with the unforgettable title *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In 1967, Professor Jeanne Chall also produced a book about the battle over reading instruction methods aptly entitled *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. And in 1973, my own book, *The New Illiterates*, was published in which I said that the methods of teaching reading in most schools were causing widespread reading disability, often referred to as "dyslexia." Finally, in 1981, Flesch came out with *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, a devastating analysis of the look-say method and its harmful effects on the children in America. So there have been no lack of books, no lack of alarms, to warn the American people, and particularly American educators, of the literacy disaster that lay ahead if the schools continued to use faulty teaching methods.

The question is, why hasn't our government done anything about it? The answer is that the government is too heavily influenced by the very same people who have brought about the disaster.

There is no precedent in history of an entire nation being dumbed down by its own government education system. Not even the communist countries did that. In fact, academic training in the communist countries was so good that it provided the citizens with the literacy that made it possible for them to break the chains of the oppressive totalitarian system itself.

Crippling a Nation

But the American public school system is slowly crippling the country by destroying the brains of its youngest citizens, and by the time the American people wake up to

what is being done to them by their psycho-educators, it may be too late. America will look more like Brazil than the America we have known. As the survey revealed, those with the lowest scores earned a median weekly salary of \$230 to \$245 while those with the highest scores had incomes of \$620 to \$680. In other words, we are creating a society in which the gap between the haves—the educated—and the have nots—the uneducated—is growing wider and wider. exactly what public education was supposed to prevent.

Of course, the ruling elite believe that a submissive, dumbed-down population, kept amused and titillated by sexual license and TV sitcoms is just fine. Just as the communist rulers of the former Soviet Union didn't care how miserable and impoverished were the lives of the masses, so the new American ruling class made up of the universitarian elite look down on everyone else as being hopelessly inferior and only worthy of the lives the elite has planned for them. It was literacy "expert" T. G. Sticht, now working for Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who wrote in 1987:

Many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. What may be crucial, they say, is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained—not its general educational level, although a small cadre of highly educated creative people is essential to innovation and growth. Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading and moving low-income families into the middle class.

That's what Outcome-Based Education is all about: the end of the American dream, the end of upward mobility. In fact, Prof. Anthony G. Oettinger, chairman of the Center for Information Policy Research at Harvard University and member of the elitist Council on Foreign Relations, told an audience of communications executives in 1981:

Our idea of literacy, I am afraid, is obsolete because it rests on a frozen and classical definition. Literacy, as we know it today, is the product of the conditions of the industrial revolution, of urbanization, of the need for a work force that could, in effect, "write in a fine round hand." . . .

But as much as we might think it is, literacy is not an eternal phenomenon. Today's literacy is a phenomenon that has its roots in the nineteenth century, and one does not have to reach much farther back to think of civilizations with different concepts of literacy based, for example, on oral, rather than written, traditions.

The present "traditional" concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? How can they acquire the skills necessary to solve their problems?

Do we, for example, really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in "a fine round hand" when they have a five-dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or, do we really have to have everybody literate—writing and reading in the traditional sense—when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?

What is speech recognition and speech synthesis all about if it does not lead to ways of reducing the burden on the individual of the imposed notions of literacy that were a product of nineteenth century economics and technology?

Complexity—everybody is moaning about tasks becoming too complex for people to do. A congressman who visited one of my classes recently said, "We have such low-grade soldiers in the U.S. that we have to train them with comic books." And an army captain in my class shot back: "What's wrong with comic books? My people *function*."

It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books, are "bad." But in the modern context of functionalism they may not be all that bad.

We have the potential for using the cathode ray tube to transmit pictorial information and for developing it to a much greater extent than we have as a dynamic form of communication, whose implications for training and schooling and so on are quite different from linear print or "frozen" literacy.

With views like those expressed by Prof. Oettinger, no wonder the schools no longer view literacy as anything but a very limited workaday "function." Indeed, Oettinger

represents the worst of pragmatic educational philosophy in which the grand purpose of education is merely to produce a "functioning" citizen. The love of pure learning, the striving for wisdom has no place in Oettinger's idea of education. Functional literacy means being able to read comic books but not Dickens or Shakespeare or the Bible. It means having just enough literacy to be able to get by, or function in our society. Gone is the notion of reading to develop one's intellect, satisfy one's curiosity about the world, enjoy good poetry, know the word of God. Gone is the notion that literacy opens the entire world of the written word to the individual and thereby becomes an inexhaustible source of pleasure and knowledge throughout one's life. Gone is the notion of books being a treasure trove for the mind, a priceless inheritance from all of those who came before us. Man is now to be reduced to a passive viewer of the cathode ray tube, responding to carefully selected stimuli like Pavlov's salivating dogs. C.S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, describes the dumbing down process that all tyrants impose on their people. Screwtape says:

What I want to fix your attention on is the vast, over-all movement towards the discrediting, and finally the elimination, of every kind of human excellence—moral, cultural, social, or intellectual. And is it not pretty to notice how *Democracy* (in the incantatory sense) is now doing for us the work that was once done by the most ancient Dictatorships, and by the same methods? You remember how one of the Greek Dictators (they called them "tyrants" then) sent an envoy to another Dictator to ask his advice about the principles of government. The second Dictator led the envoy into a field of grain, and there he snicked off with his cane the top of every stalk that rose an inch or so above the general level. The moral was plain. Allow no pre-eminence among your subjects. Let no man live who is wiser, or better, or more famous, or even handsomer than the mass. Cut them all down to a level; all slaves, all ciphers, all nobodies. All equals. Thus Tyrants could practise, in a sense, "democracy." But now "democracy" can do the same work without any other tyranny than her own. No one need now

go through the field with a cane. The little stalks will now of themselves bite the tops off the big ones. The big ones are beginning to bite off their own in their desire to Be Like Stalks. (p. 63)

Undoubtedly the universitarian elite is delighted at how well they've succeeded in dumbing down America. The survey proves that their plan has worked better than any one of them could have imagined. Think of it, destroying the literacy of the most powerful nation on earth, and with the help of its own intelligent, freedom-loving citizens to boot. And the plan continues to work like magic. Each September, the American people, like submissive sheep, willingly place their children in the government's schools where nonsurgical prefrontal lobotomies are performed on the brains of these children with virtually no resistance. And there is every indication that the process will be speeded up with whole language and OBE.

Dumbed-Down Educators

Of course, the new young psycho-educators coming out of the universities have no idea of how far we have fallen in literacy in this country. In fact, they are not even aware of how inferior their own literacy skills are compared with those of the teachers of previous generations. But it is important that we not forget the past, for that is the only way we can measure the effect of the dumbing down process. Simply compare these two statistics: the first from *School and Society* of January 30, 1915 in which the U.S. Bureau of Education reported that in 1910 only 22 out of 1,000 children between the ages of 10 and 14 in the U.S. were illiterate, a percentage rate of 2.2; the second from the *Boston Globe* of September 9, 1993 reporting that 90 million Americans can barely read and write.

The report also tells us that minorities—blacks and Hispanics—were disproportionately at the bottom of the literacy scale. Yet,

literacy statistics from 1890 to 1930 show a steady improvement in literacy among blacks. For example, in 1890, the illiteracy rate among blacks was 57.1 percent, in 1900 it was 44.5 percent, in 1910 it was 30.4 percent, in 1920 it was 22.9 percent, and in 1930 it was 16.3 percent. We have no doubt that if children had continued to be taught to read by intensive, systematic phonics, the illiteracy rate among blacks today would be close to zero. But with look-say, the statistics began to go in the the other direction. Today, black functional illiteracy now stands close to 50 percent, close to what it was in 1900! (*School and Society*, 11/19/21, p. 466; 4/9/32, p. 489)

The most reliable source of statistics on illiteracy in America prior to the introduction of look-say in the schools is *School and Society* of April 9, 1932. It states:

Illiteracy of the white population in 1930 in urban territory was 2.5 [percent]; in rural-farm territory 3.4; and in rural non-farm territory, 2.9 per cent.

Illiteracy among Negroes in the urban population was 9.2 per cent; in the rural population 23.2 per cent; in the rural non-farm population 20.5 per cent.

The high degree of literacy to be found in the North Central states is suggested by the fact that Iowa registered an illiteracy of but 0.8 per cent. That figure is striking when one considers the fact that the average for the country in 1930 was 4.3 per cent. . . .

In the North and West the percentage of illiteracy for the total population ten years old and over was 2.7; in the South, 8.2. Of the native white population six tenths of 1 per cent were illiterate both in the North and in the West, and 3.7 in the South; of the foreign-born whites 10.5 per cent in the North, 9.8 per cent in the South and 5.1 per cent in the West. In the North 4.7 per cent of the Negroes were illiterate; in the South, 19.7 per cent; in the West, 3.3 per cent.

How far we have fallen! There is only one solution to our illiteracy problem: a massive exodus from the public schools. That's the fastest, most effective way to destroy the monster before it destroys us.

Engler's Choice

On August 19, 1992, Republican Governor John Engler of Michigan signed a bill eliminating all local property taxes from support of public education. This amounted to the largest tax cut in Michigan's history. Property taxes have contributed about \$6-billion a year to the public schools, or two-thirds of total school funding, and property tax relief was high on the agenda of the state legislature. But then something totally unexpected happened.

The Republicans proposed a 20 percent cut which the Democrats called "just peanuts." The Democrats decided to go one better. Senator Debbie Stabenow, leading Democratic candidate to challenge Engler in 1994, introduced a bill eliminating property taxes entirely for school funding. The Democrats gambled that if the bill passed, Engler would have to veto it, making Democrats look like the true friend of the property owner.

In fact, when Engler heard of the Democrats' plan he told state Senator Dan DeGrow, "They won't do it." But DeGrow asked, "But what if they do?" Engler replied, "They won't... but if they do... we take it." Thus the stage was set for the biggest school funding upset in Michigan history. Apparently, the Democrats had forgotten that when it comes to political poker, Engler is an ace.

The measure's direct impact will be an average cut in property taxes of 60-65 percent, beginning with the summer 1994 tax bills. Naturally, the educators were stupefied. Robert Laundroche, finance director for Livonia Public Schools, predicted the aftershocks out of Lansing would be devastating to public education statewide. "The air around here is like people are getting up, dusting themselves off after an earthquake," he said. "There was no warning. There is utter disbelief that this could happen, and

real fear about the future." Trini Johannesen, vice president of the 123,000-member Michigan Education Association, remarked, "This is leading right to the dissolution of public education."

Meanwhile, powerful lobbies have converged on Lansing to influence the legislators who must find new ways of funding public education. What is making it difficult for the educators to get what they want is the fact that the state legislature is now controlled by Republicans who hold a majority in the state Senate, share equal power in the House, and own the Governor's mansion.

A major battle is going on between private sector lobbyists and the Michigan Education Association. Rich Studley of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce told reporters, "We support repeal of the teacher tenure act, they [the MEA] support the status quo. We support parental choice in schools, they're opposed. We support privatization, they're opposed. There are some clear policy differences."

So far, the legislators have not come up with a plan to replace the lost \$6-billion for the schools. But Governor Engler sees the situation as an historic opportunity to change education. In fact, he has his own team writing his education plan, and education groups are scrambling to head him off. (*Lansing State Journal*, 9/7/93; *Detroit Free Press*, 7/22-23/93; *American Spectator*, Oct. 93)

Comment:

No question about it, Gov. Engler has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make educational history not only in Michigan but throughout the country. Indeed, instead of trying to find ways to "improve" public education or find other sources of funding, he ought to propose privatizing the system entirely, thus relieving taxpayers of this unnecessary, debilitating and unjust millstone around their necks.

The arguments for privatization are quite compelling. In the first place, privatization can easily be implemented by simply having the school committees appoint boards of trustees to run each school in the district as a private institution. As private institutions the schools would be accountable to the consumers: parents and children. Education would have to become much more realistic and efficient. The trustees would decide on the school's philosophy of education, decide on the curriculum, hire the teachers, and charge a realistic tuition. Children from poor homes would be given scholarships by community funds set up for that purpose. Thus, every child in Michigan would have access to a good private education.

Privatization would eliminate the need for that large state bureaucracy that now runs the public schools, and it would eliminate much of the top-heavy, costly administration that presently runs the highly inefficient state system. The privatized schools would be free to raise revenues through all of the techniques now used by private schools: fund drives, foundation grants, alumni associations, bake sales, auctions, raffles, and whatever other ingenious ways they can think of.

The future of education in America can be radically changed by what Gov. Engler does in Michigan. If he decides to do the unexpected and unthinkable—privatize—he will become a national hero overnight, at least in the eyes of most Republicans, and that will insure his nomination for the Presidency in 1996. If he does less, he will have missed that rare, once-in-a-lifetime moment to make history. Technology has brought us to the point where the public schools have become largely obsolete, a virtual hindrance to the further progress of this country. It has created an underclass which has destroyed the inner city of Detroit and turned children into hardened, senseless criminals. The state

monopoly education system is the most socialistic sector of Michigan's economy. It ought to be done away with.

NAEP Tests Reveal Students' Poor Reading Skills

More than two-thirds of the nation's 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students—including one-quarter of high school seniors—are not proficient readers, according to the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The data also contained some particularly disturbing news about black students. The percentage of black high school seniors who scored at the proficient level was less than half that for white students.

"The results of this study are extremely troubling," said Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley. "As a nation, America will certainly go from great to second-rate if our children cannot read well enough."

The Congressionally mandated assessment was given in 1992 to 140,000 public and private schools across the country. Also, in findings that are sure to heighten the already-bitter debate over the best way to teach reading, the study suggests some possible links between students' reading achievement and the type of reading instruction they are getting. In grade 4, for example, students whose teachers said they had heavily emphasized literature-based approaches to teaching reading tended to do better on the assessment than students in classrooms where there was little or no attention paid to that approach.

Likewise, students who were poorer readers tended to get more phonics instruction in the classroom. However, "you can't draw a cause-and-effect relationship," cautioned Alan E. Farstrup, the executive director of the International Reading Association.

"It may be that phonics instruction is an artifact of how schools are organized or a feature of school remedial programs." Moreover, he added, poorer readers may be getting more phonics because their teachers believe they need additional instruction in that area.

The findings do, however, show that more teachers are using literature in their classrooms, integrating the teaching of reading and writing, and focusing on "whole language" strategies for teaching reading. More than 80 percent of 4th-grade teachers said they had put at least moderate emphasis on those strategies. In comparison, only 61 percent of teachers said they had given phonics a similar emphasis.

One surprise in the study was the low performance of schoolchildren in California. That state in 1987 adopted a new framework for language arts instruction that called for a significant shift from traditional approaches to teaching reading to newer, literature-based approaches. And 87 percent of California teachers said they had heavily emphasized the new approaches. Yet, the average reading-proficiency scores of California's 4th graders were near the bottom on the assessment. Only the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, Louisiana, and Mississippi had lower average scores.

Concerning the poor performance of black students, Michael D. Nettles, a University of Michigan education professor said that more information is needed to explain why black students read so poorly. Only 16 percent of black students were judged to be proficient readers, compared with 43 percent of white students, 39 percent of Asian students, and 21 percent of Hispanics. In the District of Columbia, black students had scores that were among the lowest in the nation, while its white students scored at the top nationally.

The NAEP report "indicates that we are

producing yet another generation of poor readers who will not be prepared to enter the workforce," said William H. Kolberg, the president of the National Alliance of Business, which has long contended that American workers lack adequate literacy skills. (*Education Week*, 9/22/93)

Comment:

Finally, there seems to be some recognition that teaching methods may have something to do with how well children learn to read. Better late than never. But there is so much confusion and uncertainty among educators over instruction methods, that we have no confidence in their ability to do the right thing in time to save this generation of children in the public schools. That is why our advice to parents is: get your children out of the public schools NOW.

Vital Videos

During our recent trip to Michigan, we were shown two extraordinary videos. The first was about the Waco atrocity, the most chilling video I have ever seen about our runaway government agencies and their part in perpetrating this Nazi-like assault against American citizens.

We hope that a million Americans see this video and demand an investigation as thorough as the one recently conducted on the Iran-Contra affair. The video, "Waco: The Untold Story," can be obtained from: American Justice Federation, 3850 S. Emerson Ave., Indianapolis, Indiana 46203. Phone: 317-780-5204. Price: \$20.

The second video, "The Guiding Hand," is about Gov. Clinton's famous Governor's School, in which the best and brightest students in Arkansas were selected for humanistic brainwashing over a six-week period. It can be obtained by calling 1-800-886-8852.