



The Phyllis Schlafly Report

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The Most Fulfilling Thing I've Ever Done

When people ask me, what is the most fulfilling thing I've done in my whole life, I answer — teaching my six children to read **before** they entered school. Our family got a bigger return for the time I spent on that activity than anything else I ever did. I urge you, and your family and friends, to do likewise.

The school is the wrong place to learn how to read, anyway, because reading is a solitary, not a group, activity. Reading is not something you do with other people, like playing ball; reading is something you do with a book, and other people in the room are a distraction.

Reading is a skill you have to learn to do by yourself (with the help of an adult), like learning how to walk, or ride a bike, or play the piano. Did you ever hear of anyone lining up a bunch of children at pianos and saying, Now we are all going to learn how to play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" at the same time?

When reading is taught in a classroom, most of the children spend most of their time doing "busy work" to fill up the hours. The days are so long, the repetition is so boring, the books are so stupid, the progress is so slow that many children, who were eager to learn at the start of the first grade, become bored and disorderly by the end of the first year in school.

This is especially true of little boys who simply are not ready to sit quietly at a desk and do neat work at age five or six. Forcing little boys into a structured classroom environment, and expecting them to be quiet like little girls, is the reason why, a few years later, boys outnumber girls 13 to 1 in learning failure classes and 8 to 1 among the emotionally disturbed. You can avoid this tragedy by teaching your children to read at home.

It is terribly important that your child be taught to read by the correct method **before** he is taught bad habits such as **pretending** to read by looking at pictures and guessing at the words. Your children and grandchildren can avoid all those bad habits, and the disappointments that result, if you teach your child to read at home.

You can set your children and grandchildren on the track to a good education, so they can read well enough to

get a good job and then progress in a career . . . be able to read for enjoyment and entertainment . . . be able to read the great and inspiring works of literature written in the English language . . . and have horizons of opportunity expanded by reading about the noble deeds of great Americans of achievement.

Most parents work hard to provide their children with the material things of life. Many parents work hard to provide their children with the spiritual things of life — faith in God, moral training, and good and healthy habits. There is something else you can do for your child that is important to both of these goals — because it's the key to what your child will be able to do on his own. **You can teach your child to read.**

Why should you? Aren't you paying the schools to teach your child to read? Yes, you are paying for public schools at the rate of \$5,000 per child per year, but you and your neighbors are not getting your money's worth. You should not think that your children are good readers just because they get good report cards. It's now the fashion to give all schoolchildren happy report cards in order to build their self-esteem.

Even most of those who graduate from high school, and go on to college, do not read well enough to enjoy it or to read anything important. This was pointed out by Al Shanker, longtime president of the nation's second largest teachers union and a strong supporter of public schools, who says that even the children we think are doing OK are really not. In a remarkable 1989 speech in Denver to a closed audience of teachers, he said that only 3 to 6 percent of 17- and 18-year-olds are able to read editorials and articles in newspapers and magazines, write an essay of several pages, and solve a two-step mathematical problem. That means that 94% of public school graduates **cannot** do those things. He said that 80% of public school graduates **cannot** even write a two-paragraph letter to a supermarket manager applying for a job.

This means that, unless your child is in the top 6% of his class, he is probably not getting as good an education as your grandparents received. Under Outcome-Based

Education — which eliminates traditional grading on report cards and eliminates all kinds of competition such as honor rolls and spelling bees — you will never know where your child ranks in his class, or what he is learning or not learning.

When I spoke on this subject at Baylor University, an attractive student came up to me and said, “When I entered Baylor, I discovered that I couldn’t read well enough to keep up with my courses. I had to drop out for a year and learn how to read before I continued.” She was honest about her handicap and took steps to remedy it. Most students and adults just fake it, too embarrassed for anyone to know that they cannot read.

How Reading Is Not Taught

According to government statistics, half of the American people are very poor readers, and two-thirds of school children are not meeting average literacy goals. But aren’t things getting better since we hear so much about reforming the public schools?

No, the schools are not going to do any better job of teaching reading next year, or the year after, because most public schools simply do not teach children the skill of reading. They just teach children to guess at the words.

What typically happens in the first grade is well described in Oklahoma’s “Learner Outcomes” published in 1992 by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Instead of teaching children to read by learning the sounds and syllables of the English language so the child can sound out and read new words, the teacher is instructed to use the following techniques:

“Develop a sight vocabulary of high frequency words [*i.e.*, memorize about 25 words]. . . . [Use] stories with a repetitive content [*i.e.*, stories that use the same words over and over again]. . . . Predict unknown words. . . . Use pictorial clues [*i.e.*, look at the pictures and guess what the words mean]. . . . Substitute another word [that seems to fit]. . . . Skip the word. . . . [Figure out] the meaning of what is read rather than focusing on figuring out words.”

Guessing, predicting, looking at pictures, skipping, and memorizing a few dozen words are **not** reading. They are very bad habits. The child who is trained in such bad habits is guaranteed to be a poor and inaccurate reader.

Yet, most public schools use this guessing process with all first-graders. It’s called the “Whole Language” system, which is just the trendy new name for the old, discredited word-guessing method called “whole word,” “look-and-say,” or “sight word.” Reading by the word-guessing method is part and parcel of Outcome-Based Education, the fad that is sweeping the country today.

Under Whole Language, the child memorizes a few dozen frequently used words, and then thinks he is reading because all his school books are written with a controlled vocabulary comprising only those few words. But he will never be able to read the great and good books written in the English language, such as the Bible or Shakespeare.

The average five-year-old has a speaking vocabulary of many thousands of words. In an educated home, the five-

year-old may understand as many as 25,000 spoken words. It’s a crime to put the child in a classroom and give him books that teach him only a couple of hundred words. However, if you teach him to sound out the letters and syllables — the phonics method — he will soon be able to read his entire oral vocabulary.

What Is Reading?

Reading is the skill that enables you to connect the sounds of words you already know with the print on the page. Connecting a sound with a picture is **not** reading. If a child sees a picture of grasshopper in a book and says “grasshopper,” that is **not** reading. It is only when he connects the sound “grasshopper” with the letters (g r a s s h o p p e r) that he is reading. Reading is the adventure of teaching the child to sound out the letters and syllables (grass-hop-per) and then say the word.

Teaching your child to read is so easy that any parent, grandparent, or person who cares about a child can do it in a few months. It’s not difficult or complicated or mysterious if it is taught in an orderly fashion. You don’t have to have a teacher’s certificate, any special training, or a college degree. You don’t even have to have a high school diploma — you just have to have the right attitude and the right tools to do the job.

The right tools to do the job are exactly what I have developed in my new system called *First Reader*. It’s a complete package for home use. It consists of a 192-page, 4-color hardbound reader, a 128-page workbook, two cassettes of instructions, and two “fat” pencils of the type little children should use to learn how to form their letters in the workbook.

You will be surprised — maybe even flabbergasted — at how little time it takes to teach a child to read **if** you have the right tools and use the right system. I recommend teaching in 20-minute segments, no more than three segments a day. Even if you have a job outside the home, use your precious “quality time” with your child to give him the key to a good education. Use your moments of loving intimacy with your child to teach him a skill that he can use all his life — a skill that can produce knowledge and success. You’ll never regret the time you spend on this project.

Why I Don’t Read to My Children

For the past several years, there has been a highly-publicized media campaign to promote the notion that all parents should read **to** their children. This campaign has involved many prominent and well-meaning people. Even the *Wall Street Journal* featured an editorial by a teacher called “Why I Read to My Child,” extolling the pleasures of reading fine literature to his child.

But there was one big problem with this editorial — the child was eight years old! Why wasn’t the child reading by himself? Why did the eight-year-old need his father to read to him? Why wasn’t the child taught how to read so he could be progressing to more and more difficult books? In the time this father spent reading to his child, he could

have made his son a good reader!

It is splendid to read to two- and three- and four-year-old children in order to tell them good stories and introduce them to books. But you are kidding yourself if you think that reading to your child will make him a good reader. No matter how many hours or years you spend reading to your child, that will never turn him into a reader.

If you want your child to be a ball player, do you sit your child down and read him stories about football players or baseball players? No, you go out in the back yard and teach him how to throw and catch the ball! If you want your child to play the piano, do you sit him down and read him stories about Chopin and Rachmaninoff? No, you teach him the skill of playing simple melodies, and then he can progress on his own!

Reading to your child will give you and your child a warm, cozy feeling, but you can get those same warm feelings by teaching him how to read, and then your child will have a skill he can use himself. I urge you to use your close, loving time for something really constructive — teaching your child to read.

Each One, Teach One

Teaching children to read at home can be a challenge for you and the youngsters in your family — but it is also an urgent necessity for our whole nation.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education detailed the decline in U.S. education and reported: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”

Since then, education has declined even further. The National Adult Literacy Survey, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, found in 1993 that 90 million American adults — nearly half our adult population — are poor readers, possessing only the most limited reading skills. You can read more details about this survey on the last page of this Report.

Unfortunately, this epidemic of illiteracy will get worse, not better. A second U.S. Department of Education survey in 1993 disclosed that more than two-thirds of U.S. children cannot read up to their grade level (even though “grade level” expectations have been dumbed down by about two years from what they were 50 years ago).

Cornell University sociologist Donald Hayes has released a scholarly report showing that schoolchildren’s declining verbal skills are linked to increasingly simplified schoolbooks. Hayes says that first-grade reading books are now written at about “the level at which a farmer talks to his cows.”

The consequences for our nation of this illiteracy are enormous. For example, how can illiterate people understand enough about a complex issue such as health care reform to have an intelligent opinion? Just consider what we are up against when half the American people

cannot read a single article about this issue, and know only what is put forth by the politicians in 20-second sound bites on television!

Our marvelous American constitutional republic, under a process of self-government, simply cannot survive as a democracy of illiterate people.

The media tell us that crime in the cities is our biggest problem. But crime correlates with illiteracy more than any other single factor. If you look at the people in prison, the biggest single factor that they have in common is they are illiterate.

Please join me in a nationwide campaign to get all Americans to teach their own children to read. I don’t mean just your children, I mean *everybody’s* children — so that when they go to school they will be already started on the road to learning — so the schools cannot keep them dumbed down, and the media cannot brainwash them.

Let me say something about minority groups for whom the bleeding-heart liberals pretend to show compassion. I believe that the worst of all injustices, far worse than not getting to eat at the same lunch counter, far worse than not getting to vote, is the injustice of keeping them in school for so many years without teaching them how to read. When they cannot read, they’ll never be able to advance beyond a minimum-wage job.

It’s now clear that the schools are not going to remedy this injustice. The schools have decided that they would rather teach self-esteem than reading.

You and I can do more for the disadvantaged of our nation than all the extravagant handouts and benefit programs. My *First Reader* is a tool that any mother, no matter how poorly educated herself, can use to teach her child to read — and she can learn right along with her child.

My system is equally good for children with well-educated parents and those with poorly-educated parents. It is equally good for families that have decided to homeschool and for those who plan to put their children in public or private school. It is especially important for those who plan to put their children in a formal school — so that they will learn the correct reading habits ~~before~~ they are taught the wrong ones. *First Reader* will also help children who are doing poorly in school — it will teach them to become good readers.

Please join me in a new movement called “Each one, teach one.” We can turn an illiterate population into a literate one. Let’s encourage every parent to teach his own child to read. I’ve produced the tool that is simple enough, beautiful enough, easy enough to use, and affordable enough that every family in America can use it as the key to education.

I hope that you care enough about America’s future that you will join me in this “Each one, teach one” campaign to make America a literate nation again, as we once were. Only this will enable us to fulfill the number-one Education Goal proclaimed by our Federal Government for the year 2000: “Every child should start school ready to learn.”

A Wake-Up Call for Parents

"Nearly half of U.S. population are poor readers, survey says." "Two-thirds of U.S. children read below their grade level, study finds." These newspaper headlines reveal a supreme American tragedy. Secretary of Education Richard Riley called this news America's "wake-up call to the sheer magnitude of illiteracy in this country."

The National Adult Literacy Survey, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, found that 90 million American adults — almost half our adult population — possess only the most rudimentary reading skills. That means they can't read street signs, instructions on medicine bottles, or fill out a job application.

This was not a casual public opinion survey of the type that typically asks questions of only a thousand people nationally. It was an in-depth study of more than 26,000 adults conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey and Westat Inc. of Rockville, Maryland.

The study ranked Americans into five levels and it related actual reading skills to daily life and work. According to the study, 49% of adults (90 million Americans) fall into the lowest two levels. Only 25% of the illiterates in the lowest two levels are immigrants just learning to speak English. And 4% of the illiterates in the lowest two levels had graduated from high school and been to college!

The survey found 31% of adults (61 million Americans) in the middle level, where the best they can do is to identify two facts in an article. But they will never be able to read the great books written in the English language that are part of our heritage.

The economic consequences of this lack of reading skills are massive. Those who can't read find it very difficult to hold a job at all and, when they do, they earn a median weekly income of under \$250. The *New York Times* reports business estimates of losses totaling \$25 to \$30 billion a year in "lost productivity, errors and accidents attributable to poor literacy."

Many of these unfortunate illiterates are bitter about their plight and blame society for their poverty. But the fault should be placed squarely on the public schools, which failed to teach them how to read in the first grade even though the taxpayers have generously provided an average of \$5,000 per first grade student.

Many illiterates fail to realize their own handicap. The survey found that most adults who placed in the lowest literacy levels described themselves as reading and writing English "well" or "very well." Three-fourths of adults in the lowest literacy level, and an overwhelming 95% of those in the second-to-lowest literacy level, said that their grasp of English was "acceptable" and that they didn't need help or further knowledge. They didn't seem to have a clue as to why they are unable to get a better job. Perhaps these people were taught "self-esteem" in school instead of how to read.

The ones who do realize they can't read are usually too embarrassed to admit it and go through life trying to hide it. They resort to dozens of subterfuges to conceal their handicap, such as getting someone else to fill out a job application for them.

The Literacy Prognosis is Negative

The illiteracy problem will get worse in the next decade, not better, because illiteracy among schoolchildren is just as bad as among adults. Another U.S. Department of Education study disclosed that more than two-thirds of U.S. children can't read up to their grade level. This study was based on the testing of 140,000 students.

The Education Department found that only 25% of fourth graders, only 28% of 8th graders, and only 37% of 12th graders have mastered reading material for their grade levels. The higher percentages in the upper grades do not mean that some of the kids who couldn't read 4th grade books suddenly caught up and, eight years later, were able to read 12th grade books. Most of those who couldn't read in the 4th grade just dropped out and are no longer in the count. The problem is not "dropouts" — the problem is failing to teach children to read.

This study tentatively implies that long hours of watching television may be to blame for the abysmal reading skills. But it's just as likely that the children watch television because the schools failed to teach them how to read and they didn't have anything else to do with their evenings.

Unless we are willing to become a society where only the elite can use the written language, mothers and fathers will have to assume the responsibility of teaching their own children to read. It is obvious that the public schools either can't or won't do it.

Phyllis Schlafly has her B.A. from Washington University, her M.A. from Harvard University, her J.D. from Washington University Law School, and an honorary LL.D. from Niagara University. Before her marriage she was a librarian. She taught all her six children to read before they entered school. Three are lawyers, one is an orthopedic surgeon, one has his Ph.D. in mathematics, and one is a gourmet cook. Her best-selling book, *Child Abuse in the Classroom*, was called "required reading for every parent" by Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell. She is the president of Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund which publishes the monthly *Education Reporter*. Her weekly Saturday call-in radio program is devoted to education topics.

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