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Why Textbooks and Exams Are Dumbed Down

At a recent education seminar, one speaker quoted the following questions taken from a high school *entry* examination given to Indiana 8th graders in 1911:

1. In what state, and on what waters, are the following: Chicago, Duluth, Cleveland and Buffalo? State an important fact about each.

2. A rope 500 feet long is stretched from the top of a tower and reaches 300 feet from the base of the tower; how high is the tower?

3. Write a brief biography of *Evangeline*.

4. Give the structure of a muscle and the spinal cord. Define arteries, veins, capillaries and pulse.

The speaker then quoted from the current Alabama High School Graduation Examination, which is given to 11th graders and is commonly referred to as the *exit* exam. Every question is multiple choice.

1. Next to a picture of a circle, the question reads: This is called a: (a) rectangle, (b) circle, (c) triangle, (d) square.

2. Amy bought a notebook for \$1.98 and a pen for \$.89. She also paid \$3.41 for additional supplies. How much did she spend all together?

3. Mary left _____ books in the car. (a) his books, (b) its books, (c) her books, (d) them books.

4. Basketball scores would be found in what part of the newspaper? (a) classified section, (b) editorial section, (c) entertainment section, (d) sports section.

The lowering of the level of academic achievement is obvious. The question is *why*? Are today's youngsters dumber than our grandparents and great-grandparents? Are they slower to learn?

I don't think so, but I do think that today's youngsters have not been taught as much as their ancestors. Today's schoolchildren haven't been taught basic knowledge about history and geography or simple, useful arithmetic skills. They haven't been exposed to the great works of literature.

That begs the question. We still want to know *why*. Most school personnel, when pressed with this question, start talking about today's social problems, everything from discipline to drugs, television to broken families.

The real reason is that the schools fail to teach today's schoolchildren to read in the first grade. When a child is not taught to read in the first grade, classroom assignments become more and more of a blur and a bore with each passing year, and he falls farther and farther behind.

The highest correlation between high school dropout and any other factor is illiteracy. The highest correlation between teenage pregnancy and any other factor is illiteracy. The highest correlation between prison population and any other factor is illiteracy.

Surveys show that at least 27 million adult Americans have been through the public schools and are still illiterate, and another 45 million adult Americans are marginally illiterate. That means they cannot read any important book.

ABC's 20/20 reported this year about a millionaire businessman who had graduated from high school and college, been given his teacher's certificate and worked as a public school teacher, but was illiterate. Finally, with grown children, having left teaching and built a successful business, he decided to "turn himself in" to a literacy clinic, admit his handicap, and get someone to teach him how to read.

While it isn't fair to blame the public schools for all the social ills we face today, it certainly is fair to blame them for the appallingly widespread illiteracy. Teaching children to read is the school's principal task.

The best proven method of teaching reading, namely, phonics, was censored out of the schools in the years immediately following World War II. Despite massive evidence of the failure of the methods that were substituted, about 85 percent of the schools still refuse to use the authentic phonics method (which means teaching the child the sounds and syllables of the English language so he can put them together like building blocks).

The latest silly fad in public school education is to require kindergartners to pass a test for entrance into the first grade. What we really need is a reading test that first graders must pass before exiting the first grade, because, if they can't read, school is a colossal waste of time for the child, and a fraud on the parents and taxpayers.

Illiterates — Our Most Disadvantaged Class

U.S. taxpayers have generously built and equipped the most expensive and beautiful school system in the history of the world, but we have one of the world's highest rates of illiteracy. Nothing could be a more devastating indictment of the public school system than this abysmal failure to teach children to read. Nothing has done more to create a permanent underclass of our society than the failure to teach children to read.

You are kidding yourself if you think they are all minority, rural, old, or poor. The illiterates are overwhelmingly urban, the largest subgroup is white, and the majority are under age 50 and have attended high school. The illiterates are the young adults who have been in the public schools during the last two and three decades when so many billions of dollars have been spent on education.

A Census Bureau survey shows that 8 percent of illiterates live in rural areas, whereas 41 percent live in metropolitan areas and 51 percent live in small towns and suburbs. The survey shows that 41 percent of illiterates are English-speaking whites, 22 percent are black, 22 percent are Spanish-speaking, and 15 percent are other non-English-speaking.

The survey shows that these illiterates cannot address an envelope that the post office can deliver and cannot write a check that a bank can cash. Of course, illiterates cannot read the "help wanted" section of the newspapers or fill out a job application.

Every time a new survey on illiteracy is released, educators criticize the Federal Government for not spending more money to solve this problem. But the Federal Government is not to blame directly or indirectly for this situation. The Federal Government doesn't control, direct, guide, or finance the first grade in elementary schools across the country, and that is where reading should be taught.

Illiteracy is not a matter of money at all. It's a matter of whether first-grade children are taught by the proven best method, "phonics first," which teaches children the sounds and syllables of the English language and how to put them together to read. As soon as the child learns the building blocks, he can sound new words and read his entire oral vocabulary which, for the average first grader, is about 25,000 words.

A Department of Education booklet called "What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning," offers 65 pages of common sense about education methods which produce positive results. This booklet says it is a fact that "Children get a better start in reading if they are taught phonics. Learning phonics helps children to understand the relationship between letters and sounds and to 'break the code' that links the words they hear with the words they see in print." Teaching a child to read is NOT a complicated or difficult process. It becomes so only when children are not taught the rules of the game.

For the past 40 years, more or less, most public schools

have not taught first-graders by the phonics-first method. Because of local textbook purchasing, the censorship of phonics out of first-grade readers reached school districts in different years during the 1940s and '50s.

When my eldest child started the first grade in 1955, there was NO phonics instruction in any first-grade reader in my school district. That's why I taught my six children to read at home so they would learn by the phonics-first method and start on their road to high academic achievement.

When parents ask their schools if phonics is taught, they are usually given one of two answers: "Of course, we use phonics," or "We teach a mix of phonics and other methods." Parents should be on guard against deception about phonics and "phony phonics."

Many schools falsely tell parents that phonics is used when, in reality, the child is only taught to recognize the letter-sound at the beginning of a word and perhaps at the end, but is taught to guess what is in between by its shape, length, and the picture on the page. A child taught by this "whole-word" method might read "home" for "house" and never know the difference. That is NOT the phonics method.

The answer to the illiteracy problem is not more tax dollars, not more remedial reading classes, and certainly not more bureaus to combat illiteracy. The answer is to teach first-graders to read using an intensive phonics-first method.

The Legacy of Rudolf Flesch

The reason for the high level of illiteracy in affluent America was exposed and conclusively proved by a great man who died in 1986, Dr. Rudolf Flesch. Even the *New York Times* identified him in his obituary as "the authority on literacy and clear writing."

Born in Vienna in 1911 and naturalized in America in 1944, with earned doctorates in both countries, Flesch was a prolific writer whose best-selling book titles indicate his expertise with the language. Here are a few samples: *The Art of Plain Talk*; *The Art of Readable Writing*; *The Art of Clear Thinking*; *How to Make Sense*; *How to Write, Speak and Think More Effectively*; *How to be Brief*; *Say What You Mean*; and *How to Write Plain English: A Book for Lawyers and Consumers*.

Having built his career on teaching Americans to write what he called "readable" English, in 1955 he turned his attention to the scandal that the public schools were turning out graduates who could not read well or even read at all. His most important contribution to America was his best-selling book that year called *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

Flesch told how, starting in the 1930s, the public schools switched from teaching reading in the first grade to teaching word-guessing. Instead of using systematic and intensive phonics to teach children the sounds and syllables of the English language, the schools substituted a guess-at-the-picture, look-and-say system which permitted children to memorize a few dozen or hundred words.

Then, readers and textbooks were "dumbed down" to

use only those few hundred words, adding a few more each year. Naturally the stories were boring and repetitious. It's no wonder that classes became drudgery and lacked challenge.

Twenty-five years after that landmark book, Rudolf Flesch again surveyed the public schools and found that 85 percent are still refusing to teach phonics to first-graders, and are trying to disguise their failure by pretending to teach phonics. His 1981 book on this subject was called *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*.

One survey after another has confirmed the tragedy that the majority of those who attended public schools during the last 30 years can at best read at only marginal levels. That means, for example, that they cannot read the antidote instructions on a can of Drano if a child swallows it.

The reason these people can't read, according to Rudolf Flesch, is that they were never taught how. Instead, they were taught to memorize the shapes and meanings of a few words and to skip over the short words whose shapes are not distinct enough to remember.

Children whose memory skills can't cope with such inefficiency and imprecision are often misdiagnosed as having a learning disability, dyslexia, minimal brain damage, or "attention deficit disorder."

In the last article written by Dr. Flesch before he died, he said that, when he published the truth about reading, "Naively, I thought the schools would see the error of their ways and go back to phonics. But they didn't. Instead, they attacked me bitterly and persisted in teaching look-and-say."

What is the explanation for the education establishment's stubborn resistance to phonics at the same time that more than 100 scientific studies have proved the superiority of phonics to the look-say method? One explanation may be that it is commercial and self-serving.

A dozen textbook publishers make hundreds of millions of dollars out of look-say readers, with workbooks, flashcards, and other classroom paraphernalia. A whole pseudo-science has grown up around the anti-phonics International Reading Association, with speakers, journals, workshops, and conventions where they grind out an endless flow of paper, develop remedial courses and "special education classes," and convene to urge hiring more and more tax-paid personnel to service the problems they have created.

Dr. Flesch died optimistic, believing that "sooner or later common sense will return and our children will again be taught to read." His legacy offers the solution to illiteracy. We hope America will soon take the cure.

High-Tech Doesn't Teach Reading

Toss into the pot of education the obvious need to teach schoolchildren the skill of reading, add the mystique of computers and the financial resources of one of the nation's largest corporations, and what do you get? IBM's "Writing to Read" program, which is now being peddled to school districts with the marketing skills of one of America's most

successful corporate giants. It uses computers, color monitors, printers, typewriters, video and audio cassettes, and games.

The IBM program cannot claim it is a phonics program because it isn't. Instead, IBM says it is a "language experience program" based on learning "phonemes" through computer-child interaction.

However, the phonemes are not taught by the phonics method. They are taught by the discredited word-guessing method by relating them to the pictures on the computer monitor. Children are then taught to spell the words the way they sound to the ear—the way the child "feels" about them—instead of correctly. The result is that the child's brain is programmed with faulty information. Meanwhile, the child is dazzled by the glitz of the colorful and expensive equipment, so he has a good time playing with all the fancy buttons and keys.

When a child has been taught by the phonics method, he can spell correctly because he has learned the structure of words and how to relate the written word to the spoken word. Children who are not taught by a real phonics system are so handicapped that they can't even look up a word in the dictionary.

The lack of spelling ability among those who finished school in the last two decades is obvious to any college professor or any employer. Most businesses suffer lost productivity from this drastic decline in basic skills, but some businesses, such as IBM, are able to make big bucks selling their word processors with automatic spellers.

IBM's "Writing to Read" program will produce more schoolchildren totally dependent on automatic spelling software. Just look at this example actually used on the promotional video designed to sell the IBM reading program to schools: "My mommy is gragwating [graduating]. I can jump my roap at my house. My hare is blond. My mommy is out of school but she hast to go back to school to do afu thangs."

Here is another spelling example from a child using the IBM program in Florida: "Thek yuo for leting me cum to the capdul [capitol]. We had a vere nis time."

Does it bother IBM that the program teaches children to misspell words? Not at all. IBM tells us that the child can unlearn his errors and learn correct spelling later. But it is much harder to unlearn and relearn than to learn correctly in the first place. More than likely, the child will never learn how to spell, but will be wholly dependent on IBM's automatic speller.

The IBM program costs \$10,000 to \$15,000 per school. The necessities include a Computer Station consisting of an IBM PC equipped with a Speech Attachment to "talk" to the child, the Work Journal Station at which children can listen to a taped lesson, the Listening Library Station where children can listen to recordings of children's literature, the Writing/Typing Station where children type on IBM PCs or typewriters, and the Make Words Station where children write letters with crayons and chalk.

The IBM program is designed for kindergartners and first graders, who are five-and six-year-olds. Children of that age will learn much better with the crayons and chalk that cost only a few cents than with the computers and typewriters that cost thousands of dollars. No amount of expensive equipment can substitute for giving the child the master key to reading the English language: phonics.

Illiterates Lack Shared Memories

The chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, has published an intriguing pamphlet called *American Memory* which summarizes the state of humanities and arts education in our nation's public schools. From the early 1970s to the early 1980s, the national average of the verbal SAT scores declined by some 50 points. This is the same period when the substantive content of education diminished rapidly.

The Cheney report cites *McGuffey's Fifth Reader*, widely used in public schools at the start of this century. It included stirring speeches, heroic stories, and selections from Longfellow, Hawthorne, Alcott, Dickens, and Shakespeare.

Whereas at least half the content of those old readers was made up of enduring literature, less than ten percent of the content in currently-used readers can be called classic. Instead of presenting "the best specimens of style," as McGuffey promised, current readers are straitjacketed into "readability formulas" that dictate sentence length, word length, and the number of new words that can be introduced.

For laughs, Mrs. Cheney shows how Aesop's fable about the tortoise and the hare has been rewritten to conform to a "readability formula." "Rabbit said, 'I can run. I can run fast. You can't run fast.' Turtle said, 'Look Rabbit. See the park. You and I will run. We'll run to the park.' Rabbit said, 'I want to stop. I'll stop here. I can run, but Turtle can't. I can get to the park fast.' Turtle said, 'I can't run fast. But I will not stop. Rabbit can't see me. I'll get to the park.'"

It isn't a laughing matter; it's tragic. The Cheney study concluded that, "For the most part, textbooks used in U.S. schools are poor in content, and what content they do contain is not presented in a way to make anyone care to remember it."

Humanities teachers should be "transmitters of culture," Mrs. Cheney concludes, but that is a very difficult goal because they are besieged by educational theorists, administrators, and bureaucrats, all determined to steer the daily classroom activities in another direction, usually toward behavioral objectives.

The report is particularly critical of the teaching of social studies. Originally, this subject was planned to include history and geography with some broadening additions. Today, social studies have become a mish-mash that includes courses as varied as driver education and values clarification, while history and geography are lost in the shuffle.

Surveys show that more than two-thirds of high school seniors cannot identify in which half-century the Civil War

was fought, and they can't identify the Reformation or the Magna Carta. They don't know that Rome fell, why it fell, and what is important about that event.

The study makes some specific recommendations. More time should be devoted to the study of history and literature; textbooks should contain more recognizably good literature; teachers should be more knowledgeable about the subjects they teach; and teachers should be subject to fewer requirements to take tiresome "education" courses.

Those are good objectives but are not nearly as important as changing the fundamental direction and purpose of education. The continuation of the U.S. institutions of liberty and self-government requires that modern Americans have a shared culture and a common memory of past heroes and achievers.

That memory is basic to our self-esteem, our national identity, and our vision of the future. But if our young people do not learn to read while they are very young, they will not have any treasures of our American heritage, history and literature to remember and to share.

What Has Replaced Reading?

Since the majority of schoolchildren cannot read anything that is important, what do they do all day in school? The decline in reading skills has been accompanied by a proportional increase in psychological curricula, behavior and attitude manipulation (with heavy emphasis on sex), filling out nosey questionnaires about attitudes and private family matters.

The basic book that explains what has replaced traditional academic instruction is *Child Abuse in the Classroom*, the transcript of the 1984 U.S. Department of Education hearings edited by Phyllis Schlafly. This best selling book is still available @ \$5. The essence of this book is also available under the same name on video @ \$25 (VHS or Beta), and on audio cassette @ \$5. To keep up to date on current events regarding classroom curricula and parental rights, you should subscribe to *The Education Reporter* @ \$25 per year. All the above are available from our office: Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002.

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