



# The Phyllis Schlafly Report

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## The Failure of Our Monopoly School System

"American education as it exists today will not be tolerated by the American people, by our business community, by our policy leaders for more than another few years." That was said, not by some so-called "enemy" of public schools, but by Al Shanker, longtime president of the nation's second largest teachers union and someone whose support of public education cannot be questioned.

Shanker made a remarkable speech at a conference of teachers and school administrators sponsored by the Gates Foundation in Denver in September 1989. He came right out and explained what a disastrous job the public schools are doing and he urged "drastic change." Unfortunately, this very important speech didn't get the national media attention it deserves.

The change that Shanker is recommending can be summed up in one word that strikes terror into the hearts of liberals generally, and the National Education Association (NEA) and the entire education establishment in particular: competition!

Shanker doesn't mean a cushy, friendly type of competition. He means a system in which there are winners and losers, and losing means going out of business. "In every other field of life, where there's competition, if you're running a lousy show, and if you don't change, you die."

Shanker also favors choice. He said, "we can no longer compel parents to send their kids to a given school."

We've all heard for several years about the high percentage of illiterates and dropouts. For example, Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos recently told the American Medical Association House of Delegates that, because of our 27 million illiterates, "we are in danger of becoming the world's only fully industrialized Third World nation."

But Al Shanker addressed the problem of how badly educated are the "successful" kids, that is, the ones who stay in the public schools, graduate, and go to college.

He asked, how many of our 17- and 18-year-olds are able to read editorials and articles in our better newspapers and magazines, write an essay of several pages, and solve a two-step mathematical problem? He says it's only 3 to 6 percent. That means 94 percent of public school graduates canNOT do those things!

How many can write an "adequate" letter, such as a one- or

two-paragraph letter of application to a supermarket manager conveying the idea that you are applying for a job, and allowing for some spelling and grammatical errors? Shanker says that only 20 percent of high school graduates can do this, which means that 80 percent canNOT even write a paragraph conveying a single idea.

Shanker compared the performance of U.S. schools with foreign countries. He says that 90 to 95 percent of American students who go to college would not be accepted in any college anywhere else in the world. They get into college here only because of our relatively low standards compared to all other countries.

Then Shanker directed his attention to the low quality of the teachers. He said that the mathematics test given to teachers has the same questions as are given to 6th grade pupils — and that the passing grade for teachers is 65 percent, the same as for a sixth grader. Yet, despite the elementary level of the test and the low passing grade allowed, 30 to 40 percent of prospective teachers fail. Many are hired anyway because of the shortage of teachers, and many because they passed with 65 percent.

Yet Shanker, who ought to know because his union members teach in schools all over the country, said that only a fraction of one percent of school personnel admit that there is anything wrong with public schools. Our primary task is to get people to realize there is a problem.

First among the factors that destroyed public education, according to Shanker, is that "we have a Soviet system of education in this country." By "Soviet," he said he means a system in which you are treated exactly the same if you fail as if you succeed. That's what lack of competition does, and that's why competition is so desperately needed.

Second, Shanker explained that one of the major differences between American and foreign schools is that "we spend half of our money on bureaucracy, whereas the other schools in the world don't spend more than 20 percent." We have one teacher to every 25 kids, but one supervisor for every six teachers.

Third, Shanker said that every American teacher knows that, "at the end of this year, at the end of next year, and finally with the SATs, my kids are never going to have to write an essay. They're never going to have to organize their thoughts."

The tests we use, Shanker said, "are very objective, but they measure things that are hardly worth measuring."

The remedy for the public school debacle will be painful to the entrenched bureaucracy: choice, competition, cut the bureaucracy, and change the tests. But the public is demanding it today.

(The text of the Shanker speech is in the *Education Reporter*, Dec. 1989 and Jan. 1990, and is available from Eagle Forum, Alton, IL 62002 @ \$2.00.)

## How Illiteracy Is Concealed

Secretary Lauro Cavazos's figures are staggering: "13 percent of our citizens are illiterate, 27 million are functional illiterates, and another 40 to 60 million could be called marginally literate." Instead of responding with a plan to start using a reading method that will actually teach children to read, the public school establishment is responding with a plan to conceal the fact that present reading methods simply do NOT work.

That's the conclusion we must draw from the new-style reading test given in the last school year to all Michigan public school pupils in the 4th, 7th and 10th grades. A careful look at the Michigan test (called MEAP: Michigan Educational Assessment Program) shows that it is a cheat on the public. It does not test the students on reading skills, that is, the skills of looking at combinations of letters on a printed page and formulating them into words, and then into sentences which they understand. Instead, the new Michigan test asks the students to respond to questions about attitudes, feelings, values, and expectations—questions which are matters of opinion, not fact, and have no right or wrong answers.

Thus, it would be appropriate to test a pupil on the meaning of the word "unhappy," but it would be inappropriate to ask the pupil "what makes you unhappy?" That is a privacy-invasive opinion question, not a reading skills question.

Fourth grade pupils were given two little stories in Book I called "A Pet Raccoon" and "The School Play." Instead of querying the student on what happened in the story in order to determine whether the child could read it, the test asked "What will most likely happen" after the story ended, which is just a matter of opinion and not a reading skill.

Many questions probed the child's feelings and emotions while having nothing to do with reading skills. The pupil was told to answer yes or no to: "Does feeling well help to tell about feeling jealous?", "Does feeling excited help to tell about feeling jealous?", and "Is wishing you were invited to a party instead of a friend an example of caring about someone?"

Book II of the grade 4 "reading test" featured a depressing and unrealistic 5-page tale about a child who was so jealous of her new baby brother that she tried to sell him in a rummage sale for \$6.49 in order to buy a play disguise kit (with fake nose, mustache, etc.). Fortunately, the mother showed up in time to buy the baby before someone else did.

The 4th grader was asked 46 questions about this story, most of which reinforced the mischievous storyline but did not test reading skills. For example, 21 asked, "How do you know that the person telling the story is a girl?" The correct answer was: "By looking at the pictures," and that is the only way one could answer the question because no female name or

pronoun was used in the text.

Some questions had no correct answer. For example, Question 28 asked, "what kind of a story is this?" The options listed were: "a mystery, a fairy tale, a story that could be real, a science fiction story." The story was actually none of the above; it could not be real.

Question 16 asked, "Which of the following BEST describes how the girl feels at the end of the story? (a) proud, (b) jealous, (c) silly, (d) bored." Since nothing in the story gave a clue as to whether the girl felt any of those things, this question simply called on the child to make a value judgment about the idea of selling a baby brother.

Twelve of the questions asked the child to evaluate his own reading skills by requiring him to check "strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree" about such statements as: "It was easy for me to read the words" and "I worked hard so I would do well on the test questions." These questions about the child's feelings apparently substituted for actual testing of the child's reading performance.

The 7th grade test had an outrageous 6-page story called "Cheating Mr. Diskin" about a couple of boys who cheated a merchant and got enough money to go to the movies. The lesson was that, although they felt "bad" about their dishonesty, they did achieve their goal of getting enough money to go to the movies.

Question 15 asked, "If Mr. Diskin had NOT noticed the trick, Rob would probably have felt (a) nothing at all, (b) sorry he had not used a bigger stone, (c) bad about what he had done, (d) lucky to have a friend like Soup." There is no right answer to this question based on reading the story. It is a hypothetical question that required a value judgment as to how the student thinks the dishonest boy should have felt.

Question 30 asked the student, "what type of story is this?" The options were, "a fantasy, realistic fiction, an adventure story, [or] science fiction." The answer should be: stupid, unrealistic fiction teaching that dishonesty pays.

## The New Definition of Reading

What is Michigan's justification for this peculiar new "reading test"? A news release from MEAP states that it was caused by the state's having adopted in 1986 this new definition of reading: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation."

Under this ridiculous definition, it is no longer necessary for the student to understand the printed words on the page. He can just "dynamically interact" based on his prior knowledge, on whatever is "suggested" by the few words he can actually read, and on the "context," which means figuring out the story line from the illustrations on the page.

The educators pushing this type of text have dressed up their deception by calling their approach the "whole-language" method. The practitioners of this jargon tell teachers at training sessions that they should focus on "students' overall understanding of the critical concepts and ideas in a text" instead of on reading the actual words. The new-style "reading tests" are devised to accommodate the pupils' failure to read individual words.

The whole exercise is designed to conceal from the public

the fact that the schools have simply given up on the primary task of teaching children to read. It's a consumer fraud and a disaster for the children who spend years in school but never learn the skill of reading, much less the joy of reading.

### Failing Grades About Geography

A Gallup survey showed that the United States is the only country in the world in which young people of college age know less geography than senior citizens (age 55 and older). That was one of the many dismal conclusions of an international Gallup survey conducted for the National Geographic Society.

When asked to identify specific places on a map of the world, every other country except Italy and Mexico ranked higher than America. Among the 18 to 24 year old group, the United States finished last.

The Gallup survey found that 24 million Americans cannot identify the United States on an outline map of the world, and that 44 million Americans cannot identify the Soviet Union or the Pacific Ocean. More than half of Americans have no idea what the population of their own country is.

Although 69% of Americans think it is absolutely necessary to be able to read a map, and nine out of ten believe it is much more important to be able to read a map than to write a business letter or use a calculator or PC, 58 million Americans cannot tell direction on a map or calculate the approximate distance between two points.

The average American adult could identify from outline maps only about 4 of 12 European countries, less than 3 of 8 South American countries, less than 6 of 10 U.S. states, and less than 9 of 16 key places on a map of the world.

Knowledge of geography within the United States wasn't much better. Only 55% could identify New York State on a map of the United States. The other 45% mistook New York for one of 37 different states ranging from Maine to Florida, and from coast to coast.

Despite heavy U.S. involvement in Central America, only half of all U.S. adults know that the Sandinistas and Contras have been fighting in Nicaragua. 117 million Americans don't know where Vietnam is.

One in three (32%) Americans cannot name any countries that are members of NATO. Sixteen percent think the Soviet Union is in NATO, and even one in ten (11%) college graduates make this error. Half of Americans cannot name any Warsaw Pact nations. Eleven percent think the United States belongs to this Soviet-bloc alliance.

Only 57% could identify England on a map of Europe. Although 61% of Americans surveyed identified Brazil as a South American country, it was the *only* South American country identified by even half of the respondents.

More than 10,000 respondents from the United States, Japan, France, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Italy, Canada and Mexico participated in this Gallup survey during April and May. The responses of Americans were contrasted with those of respondents in the other surveyed countries and with responses from the adult U.S. population of 40 years ago.

It is obvious from the results of this survey that a consistent pattern of evidence shows that the 18 to 24 year old age group in the United States is in a state of "crisis" when it comes to

basic geographic knowledge and skills.

There is nothing inherently difficult about learning geography. It is not nuclear physics or a subject that requires a high I.Q. or extensive prior learning. If people of any age are exposed to geographic information and apply themselves to learning it, there is no reason why they cannot become proficient in geography.

Geography is an extremely important subject. Political, economic, environmental, and social events all take place within a geographic context, and people cannot really understand the news unless they are oriented toward where the news is taking place. How can we make informed decisions about our place in the world community if we don't know where we are?

The reason why Americans over 55 years old know more geography than their children and grandchildren is that older Americans learned essential facts of geography when they were in grade school and thus had a foundation of basic knowledge to which they could add in subsequent years. A couple of decades ago, however, the so-called progressive educators eliminated geography from the schools, replacing it with a vague mish-mash called "social studies."

The report card is now in. Social studies gets an F. It's time to put geography back in the schools.

### One Type of Education Reform

When George Bush was campaigning for the Presidency, he said he wanted to be the "Education President." Nobody knew what that meant, since about 93 percent of public school funding comes from state and local sources over which the President has no control, and federal law bars the Federal Government from developing or dictating curriculum.

The way is now clear for President Bush to be the Education President through his wholehearted endorsement of parental choice in public schools. It's an idea whose time has come and, if President Bush rides this horse all the way around the schoolyard, he can not only claim his crown as the Education President but achieve real reform in the disaster area of the public schools.

Parental choice means adopting a policy of allowing enrollment in any public school by any student, rather than the system of mandatory assignment of each child to the school selected by district administrators. What makes parental choice work is legislation that requires state funding to follow the student to his new school.

Minnesota is a real trail-blazer in the choice movement. Its "access to excellence" program passed in 1988 includes open enrollment across district lines, post-secondary options for 11th and 12th graders, and a broad range of choices for at-risk students. The plan carries a strong financial sting. State aid of up to \$3,600 per student follows each pupil to the new school of his parents' choice. That money is lost by the school that the student leaves.

The choose-a-school plan is bitterly opposed by the Minnesota Federation of Teachers (which has sued the state) and the Minnesota School Boards Association. The National Education Association (NEA) is on record against freedom of choice, but the National Governors' Association in August 1986 adopted a report that said, "You can increase excellence by increasing choice."

In 1989, Iowa and Arkansas followed suit by passing open-enrollment measures so that students can attend any public school in the state. Open enrollment bills have been introduced in at least 15 other states. Six other states are considering choice proposals with more limited options for students.

The pioneers in the parental choice concept were Community School District 4 in East Harlem of New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where parents can send their children to any elementary and junior high school within the district. Both districts say the choice program has contributed to higher test scores across the board, more parental involvement, and a general enlivening of the school system.

Other districts that allow parental choice include Irvine, California and Montclair, New Jersey. In Buffalo, parents are given the choice of having their children attend neighborhood schools or one of 22 alternative elementary schools.

One of the best kept secrets in education is that Vermont has had a parental choice plan in public education since the mid-1800s. It has worked well, it has become a way of life in the Green Mountain State, and efforts to change it have been unsuccessful.

The Vermont plan is called "tuitioning." It gives parents of more than 7,000 secondary-school students the right to choose a school for their children from among a variety of public or private (but not church-affiliated) schools, with tuition paid by the local school board.

This year the Wisconsin State Legislature passed a school choice program, which will pay for low-income children in the Milwaukee public schools to attend private, nonsectarian schools. Each student who transfers to a private school will take along \$2,500 in state aid that would have gone to the Milwaukee public schools.

### Choice — The Wave of the Future

When President Reagan keynoted the Choice conference in January 1989 he said, "Choice in education is the wave of the future because it represents a return to some of the most basic American values." Continuing, Reagan said, "Choice is the most exciting thing that's going on in America today. We're talking about reasserting the right of American parents to play a vital—perhaps the central—part in designing the kind of education they believe their children will need."

Parental choice in public schools has elements of appeal to both conservatives and liberals. Conservatives see school choice as a way to break up what critics such as Xerox Corporation chairman David Kearns call "a failed monopoly," and liberals see school choice as a way of letting the poor have the same opportunity as the well-to-do.

The politicians are apparently beginning to discover the groundswell of public support for choice which was reported by the 19th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. That nationwide survey found that 7 out of 10 Americans believe that parents should be able to choose which public school their children attend. Among parents whose children actually attend public schools, support for this right of choice is even higher (76%).

When parents talk about choice, they don't mean just choice in school buildings. They mean parental choice in curriculum, too. The Gallup survey showed that the majority (51%) of public school parents feel that parents should have

more say about the courses offered. Four out of 10 public school parents also feel they should have more say about instructional material used and the selection of books placed in school libraries.

Three-fourths of public school parents, as well as three-fourths of the public, feel that increasing the number of required courses in basic subjects would improve the quality of schools. The majority of the public (58%) feel that public elementary schools do not give enough attention to reading, writing and arithmetic.

The predisposition of the American people toward choice in education extends to specific courses. By 43% to 36%, the public favors "character education" courses in the schools as opposed to leaving this subject solely to parents and churches. But the public also feels that parents should have the most influence on the content of "character" courses. Only 14% feel that teachers should have the most influence.

Furthermore, by a 5 to 3 margin, the public favors excusing pupils from "character" classes if their parents request it. The idea of excusing pupils from classes as a result of parental objections is generally opposed by the NEA.

By a majority of 68% to 26%, the public favors a proposed amendment allowing school prayer, and 71% believe that this would offend only a small percentage of people.

The public appears to have a natural distrust of the Federal Government when it comes to schools. Public school parents split evenly on whether the Federal Government should have more or less influence on local public schools. By a slight margin (42% to 40%), parents of public school pupils say a federal Department of Education is not needed at all. Since the Department of Education was established in 1980, it has spent more than \$100 billion. If \$100 billion is not enough to convince the American people that the Department is needed, then it should be a prime target for budget-cutting.

Americans admire competition in most areas of life, so why don't we demand it in education? We've had enough experiments to demonstrate that choice stimulates competition among schools, ensures accountability, and increases parental involvement.

Parental choice is the most significant reform in education today. Yet it is vigorously opposed by most teachers' unions and many school boards and school administrators. The question about choice in schools ought not to be why, but why not?

**Phyllis Schlafly**, who writes and speaks frequently on education, edited the hundreds of testimonies given at the 1984 U.S. Department of Education hearings on the federal Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment into the book called *Child Abuse in the Classroom* (\$4.95). She is president of Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund which publishes the *Education Reporter*, a monthly newspaper with current news on these same subjects (\$25/year).

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