Senator Grassley Scores Victory for Parents

April 21, 1994 *by Phyllis Schlafly*

Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) delivered a stunning victory for parents with the signing into law of his Parental Rights Restoration Amendment to Goals 2000. His amendment simplifies and puts teeth into the existing Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) by making it more user-friendly for parents seeking its protection for their children.

Unanimous votes in the Senate are very rare, but on February 8 the Grassley Amendment passed the Senate by the unanimous vote of 93 to 0. It became law on March 31 when President Clinton signed Goals 2000.

The original PPRA was passed by Congress in 1978, but it was ignored until 1984 when the U.S. Department of Education finally issued regulations in response to public demand. The PPRA was designed to forbid schools, without prior written parental consent, from imposing psychological or psychiatric tests or treatment on children, or to invade their privacy by making them answer nosy questions about sex, attitudes, and family matters that are embarrassing or none of the school's business.

The National Education Association and other school personnel associations had a collective tantrum when the Reagan Administration issued the regulations in 1984. The schools have since used every technicality to prevent parents from asserting their rights under the law.

Schools all over the country have been using a form letter to roadblock parents by telling them that PPRA does not apply to whatever curriculum is challenged. It has never been enforced, despite many examples of clear violations.

The Grassley amendment strikes out the requirements that a challenged curriculum be a "research project designed to explore or develop new or unproven teaching methods or techniques," and that the parent show that the student was subjected to "psychiatric or psychological examination, testing, or treatment." Those terms were cumbersome and unclear to parents and school personnel.

Grassley's amendment applies the law to "any survey, analysis or evaluation" that reveals private information, whether or not it meets narrow definitions of "research," "new," "psychological" or "psychiatric."

The Grassley amendment strikes out the requirement that the parent show that the "primary purpose" of the activity is to reveal private information. The Senator's amendment simply requires that, if it reveals private information, the school must get prior written consent.

Under the newly enacted Grassley Amendment, parents will no longer have to trace federal funding directly to the specific activity they find offensive. The

Senator's amendment applies the law to "any applicable program," which means any program funded by the Department of Education, such as the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act.

Under the Grassley Amendment, parents will simply have to show that the survey, analysis or evaluation reveals private information in one of seven categories, that it is in a federally funded program, and that their consent was not obtained. This will provide wider protection for parents and students.

The Grassley amendment places an affirmative responsibility on the educational agencies and institutions to give "effective notice" to the parents and students of their rights under this section. The remedy under the language is the threat of the school's losing its federal funding.

Senator Grassley said that his amendment is important to "empower parents to walk within their constitutional rights." "Not only did the existing law fail to foster a healthy degree of parental involvement in a child's education, it actually discouraged it by establishing barriers to information for interested parents," Grassley said.

"Parents will no longer be forced to jump through all these hoops just to know what happens each day at their children's school," Grassley added.

Grassley said that his interest in reaffirming parents' right to know what goes on in the classroom was heightened in recent years by cases described to him by frustrated parents who learned of controversial questionnaires given to children. Some children were even specifically told not to tell their parents.

The new user-friendly PPRA should be of great assistance to parents who are engaged in curriculum battles. Many of the current trendy courses in self-esteem, sex and drugs are based on non-academic techniques and on asking students nosy questions.