P.S. to the NEWS
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PRIORITIES IN EDUCATION

It used to be that the primary purpose of American schools was to train our young people in certain skills such as reading and arithmetic, to impart knowledge such as history and geography, and to build character so they would develop into useful citizens. Over the last generation, these were replaced by different priorities. The progressive educationists told us that social adjustment should be our overriding objective. The advocates of forced busing insisted that our number-one priority should be racial integration.

When the post-World War II baby boom hit the schools, it caused a great techer shortage coincidentally with the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The result was that thousands of young men found that becoming a teacher, or spending many years as a college student, was a respectable way to avoid the draft.

Three straws in the wind this year indicate that we may again be able to make quality education our first priority. The sharp drop in the U.S. birth rate combined with the skyrocketing cost of a college education have suddenly meant that there are thousands of empty classrooms and that most colleges are crying for students.

This means that there are many times more teachers than jobs available. In some desirable areas, schools have ten applicants for every teacher vacancy. Schools and colleges can now afford to be choosy and select only the very best teachers.

Secondly, the recent Supreme Court decision in the Detroit

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busing case has squelched forced busing from the suburbs into the inner cities. This decision enables us to push for a better education for all children, instead of consuming our energy, money, time and tempers in a disruptive scheme desired by neither blacks nor whites.

The third straw in the wind this year is the growing influence of the Reading Reform Foundation, a voluntary organization dedicated to restoring to every American child the right to read -- by being taught with the only successful method, namely, phonics. At least 32 percent of the public schools in the United States have now returned to teaching reading by using the alphabet and its sounds, the basis of the phonics method.

Children who are taught by phonics are the fortunate ones because they have been given the basic tool of all education, the skill of reading. They don't need any courses in "remedial reading." The disadvantaged children in our society are those whose learning process has been deliberately stultified by months of the stalling technique called "reading readiness," followed by years of the look-and-say or whole-word method of reading. This is why a third of all U.S. school-age children in the fifth grade and above are functionally illiterate (defined as reading below fifth-grade level).

I hope that these recent events are the prelude to placing quality education for every child in America as the top priority of our schools.

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