Making Schools Accountable

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Are taxpayer-subsidized infomercials and payoffs to friendly commentators the federal government's answer to education problems? The U.S. Education Department's secret million-dollar taxpayer-financed marketing campaign to sell the No Child Left Behind Act is only a symptom of what's wrong.

Ronald Reagan used to say that government is not the solution, it's the problem. But we are in the post-Clinton era, and Clinton told us in Northbrook, Illinois in 1997 to get over "our love of local control of the schools."

While the national media are currently filled with pictures of horrors all over the world, the biggest tragedy in America rates only local stories. I'm referring to the sad, sad tale of how our public school system promotes millions of kids all the way into high school without ever teaching them how to read.

This situation wasn't pictured on network television, or even on CNN or Fox, but the Orlando Sentinel gave its customers the bad news on New Year's Day. Only 32 percent of Florida ninth-graders and only 34 percent of Florida tenth graders can read at grade level.

That means two-thirds of Florida public school students are just marking time in legally-enforced incarceration in government buildings that are euphemistically called schools. Think of all those hours those illiterates have available to create mischief, annoy teachers and other students, and get into trouble.

Why is anyone surprised at the truancy and dropout rates? Wouldn't you -- whether you are a student or a parent -- check out of the system if it just baby-sat you for nine school years and never taught you how to read?

This high rate of nonreaders is not new; it obviously has existed for years, and I've reported it in this column over and over again. If ninth-graders can't read, we can infer that they couldn't read in the eighth grade, or the seventh grade, or the sixth grade, etc., but were just promoted anyway.

What made this a 2005 news story, according to the Sentinel, is that school officials "are panicking," but not because of the appalling illiteracy rate. It's because the No Child Left Behind Act is enforcing accountability and the nonreaders are giving entire schools a bad name.

The state of Florida is now giving a letter grade to each school each spring. The school can drop a whole letter (as from a C to a D) and be hit with a financial penalty if poor readers fail to improve two years in a row.

This threat has motivated the schools into serious action, and their solution to this depressing report is predictable. Spend more taxpayers' money and hire a new set of teachers to teach high schoolers what we already paid elementary school teachers to do.

Orlando school officials have decided to experiment with three new reading approaches: Scholastic's Read 180, which relies heavily on students using computers and comes with a price tag of $439,000; McGraw-Hill's SRA Corrective Reading at $130,000; and Strategically Oriented Intensive Reading Instruction at $84,000.

According to the Sentinel, these three methods will be used on different groups of kids because "no one knows exactly what works." That's not true; we already know what works: intensive, systematic phonics.

But for years, most public schools have rejected what works in favor of what's easy: the so-called whole-word method. Instead of teaching first-graders the sounds and syllables of the English language, and how to put them together like building blocks to read big words, schools have taught children to memorize a short list of frequently used words, guess at whole words by looking at the pictures on the page, predict words based on the content of the story, substitute words that seem to fit, and simply skip over words they don't recognize.

Memorizing, guessing, looking at pictures, predicting, substituting, and skipping, are not reading; they are very bad habits. The child who is trained in those bad habits is guaranteed to be a poor and inaccurate reader.

This whole-word system gets children through the first and second grades when they are given only stories with one-syllable words and mind-numbing repetition, but it is doomed to failure when they are confronted with polysyllabic words in later grades.

Children who are not taught phonics grow up to be adults who can never be hired for anything other than a minimum-wage job. They will never be assimilated into our economy and achieve the American dream.

Children who are not taught phonics grow up to be incompetent voters, like the Palm Beach County voters who spoiled their ballots in 2000 by over-voting for both Al Gore and the Libertarian third-party candidate. Never having been taught to sound out the syllables, they saw "Libertarian" and thought they were selecting "Lieberman" for vice president.