Who Really Failed: Students Or The System?

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All over the country, students, their parents and teachers are in an uproar about the tens of thousands who flunked the test designated as the requirement for high school graduation. Threats of withholding diplomas have brought out accusations, recriminations, and even angry mobs.
States have devised various ways to deal with this crisis. Award the diplomas anyway, stonewall the complainers, keep the students in school an extra year, postpone the deadline to 2004 or even 2006, lower the standards, lower the cutoff score, reduce the number of questions a student must answer correctly, substitute another test, or seek test waivers from the federal government.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001 doesn't mandate a test for graduation, but it does require all schools to implement standards and annual tests in reading and math for the third through eighth grades, and show "adequate yearly progress" not only for the school but for minority subgroups. The buzz word is accountability and noncompliance brings costly sanctions.

The Act was passed with bipartisan support. But the Democrats' biggest constituency, the teachers unions, opposed the tests initially and are now inciting the clamor against them, along with the usual whine that the solution is more money.

I'm going to venture the heretical opinion that I sympathize with the students who flunked. After the school failed to teach them to read, gave them good grades and promoted them year after year, it's no wonder they feel cheated when they are denied diplomas.

How did anybody expect the students to pass their 4th grade, 8th grade and 12th grade tests if they didn't learn phonics in the first grade? Don't lay the guilt on the students; lay it on the system that failed the students.

On June 19 the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's Report Card, reported that 36 percent of 4th graders canNOT read at what the test defined as a "basic" level. The figure for whites is 25 percent, for Latinos 56 percent, and for blacks 60 percent.

The NAEP report also revealed the consistent and dramatic decline of all reading skills in the upper grades. One in four 12th graders canNOT read at a "basic" level, down from one in five in 1992.

The explanation for this depressing report is obvious. Elementary school children can memorize a few hundred words so they are recorded as reading at grade level, but when they get to high school they can't read the bigger words because they were never taught phonics (the system of sounding out the syllables and putting them together like building blocks).

The public school establishment adamantly refuses to teach first graders to read by phonics even though study after study, including one released in June by the National Institute for Early Education Research, shows that phonics is essential to becoming a good reader. Some teachers colleges even peddle the paranoid theory that phonics is a "Far Right" conspiracy.

The public school establishment is digging in its heels against the Bush Administration program called Reading First, which offers $5 billion over six years to state and local school districts to help every child

read by the end of the third grade. The schools are running to their pals in the liberal media to air opposition to the requirement that a proven, successful reading system be used.

To conceal the public school's abysmal failure to teach reading, education theorists who call themselves "social constructionists" are "departing from traditional notions of reading and writing" and trying to "redefine what it means to be literate." They are spreading the ridiculous notion that literacy does not mean reading the printed text, but is "inherently social" and flows from students developing "ways of thinking from such socially based experiences."

According to these academics quoted on the Electronic Classroom website, "meaning from text is not `out there' to be acquired but is something that is constructed by individuals through their interactions with each other and the world." So, students can "construct" their own understanding of the text by interacting with their (probably semi- literate) peers.

The role of reading teachers is supposedly "not to impart universal truths about text but to foster an environment where learners come to construct understanding through interaction." It's more important to engage in "student talk as opposed to teacher talk."

Under this new definition of literacy, you can call yourself literate if you can send a terse email that has been spellchecked, or you can engage in electronic chat sessions. "Being literate ... means being able to communicate in a post-typographic world."

Teaching reading is not rocket science. Parents who care about their children's education should teach their own children to read using a good phonics system, which is what I did with my six children.