P.S. to the NEWS
by PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY

Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002
Phone: 618-462-5415

RELEASE: JUNE 15

THE LITERACY HOAX

When a high school student reads "Solomon" as "salami," or "hurricane" as "hammer," something is basically wrong. The error is even more dramatic when a student reads "clergyman" as "groceryman," "pony" as "horse," or "vacation" as "holiday."

Such mistakes as these are the pitiful result of the child's having been taught to read by the so-called progressive method of teaching reading which is variously called "look-say," "whole word," "sight word," or "Dick and Jane." Correction; that's not a method of teaching reading; it's just a device of teaching children to memorize a limited number of words by their association with pictures.

The nonsense and the deceit of the look-say method was first exposed by Rudolph Flesch in his 1955 best seller called "Why Johnny Can't Read." Despite the fact that both the theory and the practice of look-say have been totally discredited, like Ol' Man River it just keeps rolling along.

Recent research shows that 75 percent of public school children are taught by the look-say method, which means that tens of thousands of first graders every year are deliberately handicapped by being denied the right to read. The other 25 percent of first graders in public schools have the good fortune to be taught to read by the phonics method, in which they learn to hear, read, and write the separate vowel and consonant sounds which make up the English language.

The crippling of pupils by the curse of look-say has resulted in what was accurately labeled "the literacy hoax" by Paul Copperman when he testified this year before the Eagleton Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities. He charged that it is a hoax to deceive school children and their parents by inflating the average report-card grade from C to B at the same time that academic skills have drastically declined.

(more)

Copperman says that "every generation of Americans has surpassed its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment except the present one. For the first time in American history, the educational skills of one generation will not even approach those of their parents."

Copperman leveled most of his criticism at high schools. His survey shows that the average high school student today takes 25 percent less English, 35 percent less world history, 35 percent less government and civics, 30 percent less geography, and 20 percent less science and mathematics than students a generation ago.

Today's student is assigned less than half the homework and his textbooks have been rewritten for a reading level two years lower than the grade he is in. Traditional and rigorous courses have been replaced by educational entertainment.

Unfortunately, when confronted with a problem that affects large numbers of people, many react by saying, let's appropriate more government money or set up a new task force to study it. The federal government is not only not the solution to the literacy hoax, it is part of the problem.

Copperman urges the passage of a tuition tax credit bill not merely to assist the survival of private and religious schools (which are doing a better job in teaching academic skills) but to provide competition for public schools. In the American system, competition is the miracle factor which produces better consumer products at lower costs.

Is it really important that all Americans learn to read? It takes a 7th grade reading level to hold a job as a cook, an 8th grade level to function as a mechanic, and a 9th or 10th grade level to hold a job as a supply clerk. But 10 to 20 percent of this year's high school graduates cannot function at any of these levels, and the performance of 30 to 40 percent will be so marginal that they may not be able to hold those jobs.

The real problem begins in the first grade. High school students will never be able to read the textbooks their parents read at the same level if they haven't mastered first-grade phonics -- the key to all learning.

(end)