The Problems With Dropouts

by Phyllis Schlafly June 2, 2004

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Poor Bill Cosby. He doesn't deserve the negative fallout that followed his remarks about the dropout rate of some poor students. Even Kweisi Mfume, president of the NAACP, said that most of the uproar in the press and on the internet is not about the facts Cosby cited but because he said it publicly.

The emperor may have no clothes, but nobody is supposed to notice.

Cosby and other dignitaries were participating at a gala event at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education. That school desegregation decision in 1954 came with high hopes that integrating public schools would assure a good education for black children and put them on the road to full integration in America's economic life.

Vashon High School in the City of St. Louis is a good example of why Cosby has reason to be exasperated with everybody's failure to educate blacks. It reopened with fanfare in the fall of 2002 after being rebuilt at a cost of $40 million.

A year and a half later, it's a symbol of the failure of big dollars to deliver education in a depressed urban area. Dramatic photographs in the liberal St. Louis Post-Dispatch showed students ruling as a "mobocracy," assaulting and intimidating teachers and students, disrupting classes, and ruling the halls with fist fights and "bold defiance."

Most of the Brown anniversary gatherings were clouded by the realization that the promise of Brown has not been realized. CNN's anniversary documentary dared to ask the question, "Did the Supreme Court make a mistake?", interviewing African-American students who complained about the assumption that "blacks can only learn when white kids are around."

I empathize with Bill Cosby for daring to demand accountability from both parents and schools about a major social problem, but I also empathize with the kids who dropped out. Why should they stay in school if they can't read high school books?

According to a study released by the American Diploma Project, a consortium of education-reform groups, employers today consider high school diplomas as proof only that 18-year-olds attended school. They say that high school exit exams required by nearly half the states fail to measure what matters to colleges or employers, and generally assess only 8th or 9th-grade content.

The Project's two-year review of education in five states found that more than half of all high school graduates need remedial classes in college.

As thousands of schoolchildren fail the federally mandated tests at the end of this school year, a debate has erupted about the pros and cons of social promotion, especially in New York City, Chicago and Houston. Advocates of social promotion cite dozens of studies concluding that policies forcing students to repeat a grade are costly and counterproductive, and result in no gains in student achievement and increases in dropout rates.

Two recent studies concluded that Chicago's nine-year effort to end social promotion, which served as a model for Mayor Bloomberg's policy in New York City, has been enormously expensive while yielding few benefits. The Chicago Board of Education then voted to ease its promotion rules by eliminating math scores as a factor and limiting the number of years a student can be forced to repeat.

On the other hand, a year after Governor Jeb Bush ended social promotion in Florida, more Florida 3rd graders are reading at or above grade level than ever before. Most of the 3rd graders held back showed significant improvement.

I believe that the "hold back" decision should be made at the end of the first grade, and that is the point where tutorial help should be given. If a child can't read real books by the end of the first grade, there is no point in promoting him to the second grade.

The last 50 years have seen the spending of incredible sums of money for teachers, buildings, administrators, forced busing, and all kinds of extra-curricular resources. But the most essential factor was left wanting: the teaching of reading in the first grade.

We must get rid of the ridiculous myth that children will pick up reading naturally just like learning to talk. Reid Lyon of the reading and language branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development says, "The converging scientific evidence is very clear" that poor readers need to be taught the "building blocks" of words, also known as phonics.

But why teach phonics only after kids have been diagnosed as "poor readers"? Why not give them that essential skill in the first grade?

If the schools don't teach your child to read in the first grade, then parents should take Bill Cosby's advice. Get a good phonics system and teach your own child to read. I did, and you can, too.

Phyllis Schlafly is the author of a reading system called Turbo Reader.