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ONE MORE REPORT CARD ON THE SCHOOLS' FAILURE

It is difficult to suppress a yawn, a "ho hum," and a weary sense of deja vu, in reading the slick-paper report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. It was a media event for a day; it has given columnists something to write about, and commissions and legislatures an excuse to hold more hearings.

But it won't have any more impact than a hundred other bad "report cards" on the schools because it offers remedies that do not tackle the real problem.

If I may use an irreverent comparison, it's as though we were reading a report by a national commmission on excellence in religion which overlooked the fundamental of faith in God. Or, if I may use a more practical comparison, it's as though we were reading a report by a national commission on excellence in home maintenance which failed to recognize the problem of termites eating out the foundations.

The Commission duly noted the already-known depressing facts: the 23 million adult illiterates, the 17-year decline in SAT scores, the U.S. failures in national and international competitions.

The Commission's recommendations start with requiring four years of English in high school so that students will be equipped to comprehend what they read, write effective papers, discuss ideas intelligently, and know our literary heritage. But the problem is that the students are illiterate; so it will hardly do them any good to sit in English literature classes and be exposed to "our literary heritage."

The Commission is worried about the teaching of social science in high school, arguing that students should be taught the broad sweep of ancient and contemporary ideas, the fundamentals of how our American system operates, and how to grasp the difference between free and repressive societies. Of course, students should learn all those good things. But unless we are going to convert our high schools into children's story-telling hours, the student must read that history themselves. So we are back to square one with their inability to read at all.

The Commission wants high schools to teach students how to apply mathematics and science to everyday situations, and to teach them about the social and environmental implications of scientific development. Those are very good objectives, but are absolutely dependent on the student's ability to read at all.

The Commission's primary contribution to this continuing debate is to recommend that all high school graduates be required to take the "Five New Basics", which are defined as four years of English, three years of mathmatics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. Those are all good things, but they are basically irrelevant if the child isn't a good reader.

The Commission misappropriated and misused the term "basics." As parents and the public understand the term, "basics" does not mean the reading of high school-level literature, history, or science. "Basics" means the skills of reading, writing and spelling the English language; plus the arithmetic skills of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, and of applying those skills to daily life such as getting the proper change at a checkout counter.

Instead of talking about tightening up standards for admission to college, the Commission would have done more for education if it had urged tightening up standards for admission to the Second Grade. The basic skill of reading should be taught in the First Grade, and, if it isn't, the child spends the rest of his school years building castles in the sand which cannot survive the next wave.

The Commission didn't need to spend $785,000 to find out what to do. It could have spent a few hundred dollars and bought copies of "Why Johnny Still Can't Read" by Rudolf Flesch (Harper & Row, 1981). That book shows why children don't learn how to read: they are not taught by the phonics method in the First Grade.

Another problem with the Commission's report is its unchallenged acceptance of the large role of the Federal Government. The Commission says that the Federal Government "has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest."

The U.S. Constitution did not give the Federal Government any role whatsoever in education. The Federal role is a left-wing liberal creation and growth of the last 20 years -- the same 20 years when standards of excellence have deteriorated so much.