Schools Don't Teach Children How to Write

June 30, 1994 *by Phyllis Schlafly*

It's official now. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) just issued its 1992 "Writing Report Card" based on extensive surveys of students who were asked to complete a variety of tasks requiring persuasive, informative, and narrative writing. And guess what? Students can't write.

NAEP tested a representative national sample of30,000 students in grades 4, 8 and 12 and discovered that even the best students find it hard to write persuasively, using arguments and evidence. Only three percent of students at any grade level were able to write an "elaborated" response in an assignment called "persuasive-writing."

Education spokesmen described the results as "disappointing." They are worse than that; the results are a tragedy.

The comments were layered with the usual excuse that children watch too much television. Probably they do, but that's not why they can't write. Nobody ever expected television to teach kids how to write.

We do expect public schools to teach children how to write. My writing training started in the 4th grade of a St. Louis public school where a wonderful teacher expected each student to turn in a new original composition every morning, which she corrected and evaluated.

I don't know why anyone should be surprised at today's results. Eighth grade teachers admit that the majority of students spend less than one hour a week of school time on developing writing proficiency.

In addition, NAEP discovered that 52 percent of 8th graders and 37 percent of 12th graders reported never or hardly ever being given a writing assignment of three or more pages.

But that's not the worst of it. When schools do give writing assignments, all too frequently they teach children to write badly.

The principal writing experience most public students have is an exercise called "journal writing." It has become a staple of public schooling over the past ten years, usually in English classes, but often in other classes, too.

Whatever the real purpose of journal writing, in practice it teaches children to write badly. Journal writing affirmatively teaches the child not only to disregard, but to disdain, every element of good writing, including putting thoughts in an orderly sequence, marshalling facts to support a proposition, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and even just making sense.

If you doubt that schools can be this bad, seek out some journal-writing instructions. For example, a 12-page "Student Guide to Writing a Journal" used in the 8th grade advises students: "Don't worry too much about style or correctness ...

regular sentence structure, punctuation, logical sequences and so forth." The teacher will not "criticize or even evaluate your writing."

The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin published an article by one enthusiastic teacher of journal-writing. Here's how she described her mission: "No matter how poorly a student spells or how poorly a sentence is structured, a student can still make high marks on journal writing." Her rationale was that the higher grades make poor students "feel successful."

To replace the teaching of writing skills with the promotion of unearned self esteem is a cheat on the students. To allow, even encourage, the repetition of writing mistakes, while pretending that mistakes don't matter, is the direct opposite of what education should be.

Spelling is a lost art. The appalling inability of college graduates, as well as high school graduates, to spell is obvious to anyone who cares to look at their written work .

Some schools actually encourage children to misspell words by telling them to write words any way they seem to sound. When parents protest, they are told, don't worry; the children will learn the correct spelling later.

That's not true. Bad habits learned when you are young are very difficult to shake. It's a terrible mistake to teach children bad habits (of spelling or anything else), and then expect them to self-correct later.

No wonder the SAT scores have been dropping steadily and dramatically for 20 years. The education establishment has an answer for that: just raise the scores by 100 points. They don't call this cheating; they call it "recentering."

Beginning next year, a 430 SAT score on the verbal section will suddenly become a 510. Of course, the students won't be any smarter, but they will feel good about their higher scores and the public will be further anesthetized about the declining value of a public school diploma.

The inability of young people to write is an even better index of the failure of the public schools than the now widely recognized high rate of illiteracy. Whereas reading may be considered a passive skill, writing is an active skill that forces you to formulate your own thoughts, organize them in a coherent way, and put them on paper in a form that communicates a message to others.

That's precisely what most young people cannot do.

If you can't write well, you can't think well. And if you can't think well, look out, someone else will do your thinking for you.