How the Schools Produce Juvenile Delinquents

May 12, 1994 *by Phyllis Schlafly*

Study after study of adolescents at correctional institutions has shown that the one thing they have in common is that they cannot-read. With a research grant funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Michael Brunner set out to determine if the latter causes the former.

He spent two years analyzing and integrating the literature on illiteracy and recidivism. In a new book called "Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential," he comes to the chilling conclusion that reading failure is a major cause, rather than just a correlate, of anti-social behavior.

The measure of literacy expectations in the past has always been what an individual can talk about and comprehend. Studies show that most juvenile delinquents simply cannot read and write what they can talk about and comprehend.

Brunner found that a high percentage of incarcerated juveniles were diagnosed early in school as "learning disabled" even though there was no evidence of specific neurological abnormalities. It may be just a coincidence, but the more students who get labelled "learning disabled," the more state and federal government money flows into the local school system.

In any event, these children never receive the kind of reading instruction that is successful, namely, intensive, systematic phonics. So they never learn how to identify sounds in isolation, to blend individual speech sounds into words, or to segment polysyllabic words into speech sounds.

Quite a number of reading instruction programs have been introduced into juvenile correctional institutions, and Brunner describes the experiences of some of the instructors in these programs. They have discovered that failure to learn to read is a major cause for the frustration and low self-esteem that lead to juvenile delinquency.

Brunner reports a poignant interview with "Joey," who could decipher only four words and spell two. His years in the public school system were a time of constant humiliation because he could not read. He said, "I just liked to fight [so] don't nobody laugh at me." In the correctional institution, Joey was successfully taught to read with remedial intensive phonics.

Another teenager, interviewed at Ironwood Maximum Security Prison after he was successfully taught by the phonics method, almost became a new person as a result of his new accomplishment. "People act like I'm there now that I can read," he said.

These teenagers were experiencing success for the first time in their lives.

Brunner challenges the laws that mandate schooling until age 18 and believes that they contribute to juvenile delinquency. Interviews with special education

teachers indicate that forcing a child to experience the humiliation of failure over and over again leads to anti-social aggressiveness and juvenile crime.

Brunner relates Pavlov's conditioned reflex experiments: An individual must have a goal, must have sustained pressure to achieve that goal, and must not be denied the means to achieve that goal. If, instead, the child experiences sustained frustration in trying to achieve that goal, anti-social behavior results.

The anti-social aggression that Pavlov created in the laboratory is being created in tens of thousands of classrooms across our nation because the schools use pedagogy that produces failure. All the ingredients to create anti-social aggression through sustained frustration are present in the reading methods used in most public schools today.

The widely-used Whole Language method makes the goal of reading unattainable for the average child who has not had help from other sources. The student is continually pressured to achieve this unattainable goal by teachers, parents and peers.

The student has no alternative for achieving this goal because elementary schools typically offer no choice in curriculum, and compulsory attendance laws imprison him in a failure-producing environment. For many, this unrelenting frustration explodes into resentment and hostility of a magnitude that is incomprehensible to those who find reading as easy as breathing and typically cannot remember how they learned.

Brunner's solution for this dilemma is for parents to ask their school boards to make a public announcement as to whether the school uses a systematic intensive phonics curriculum. This is unrealistic; most schools give lip service to teaching phonics, but in fact they merely give first graders a few phonetic clues, such as initial consonant sounds, and then urge them to guess at the rest of the words.

Dr. Patrick Groff asserts in the preface that, if school boards and state legislators would defund reading that is not supported by experimental, comparative research, then phonics instruction would be funded and Whole Language would not.

Until we apply common sense and honest standards to measure the success or failure of publicly funded reading methods, there will be no change in the present appalling levels of illiteracy. The only immediate solution is for parents to teach their children to read at home -- and this effort is especially necessary for those children who may be targets for recruitment into anti-social behavior.