FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

RELEASE: May 20, 1983

THE SHAME OF ILLITERACY

The first time I saw the figure, I thought it was a newspaper's typographical error. The second time I saw it, I thought it was a wild exaggeration of sensational journalism. But the figure is now so widely quoted and used in authoritative articles that it must be an approximation of the truth.

The incredible figure is that 23 million Americans -- one in every five adults -- is functionally illiterate. They simply do not have the reading and writing skills necessary to cope with life in American society.

But how can our society cope with such an appalling number of Americans who cannot take a written exam to get a driver's license, cannot read road signs, cannot read the "help wanted" sections, cannot fill out a job application, cannot read a bus schedule, cannot read instructions on a medicine bottle, and of course cannot read instructions to operate the simplest kind of machinery?

At the same time, modern society is getting more complex. Our economy has fewer and fewer jobs available that require no reading at all.

The Coalition for Literacy estimates that functional illiteracy costs our country more than $225 billion a year in incompetent job performance, unrealized tax revenues, remedial education in business and the military, and in welfare payments and crime.

One can pick up almost any paper now and read about the plight of the new illiterates in their twenties and thirties, each with his own brand of horror story about the way he was promoted through grade and high school but, somehow, was never taught to read.

Newspapers and magazines have been filled for years with millions of words about various aspects of education, its problems, and its claimed need for more and more taxpayers' money. One would get the impression from the volume of articles that the principal goals of the school system are forced busing, the total elimination of all prayer and reference to religion, sexuality classes, the elimination of sex "stereotypes," and more spacious and costly buildings and equipment. If all the energy that has gone

into those goals had been put into teaching children to read, our children would be tremendously better off.

We need some righteous indignation at the way the children have been cheated, at the way the parents have been deceived, and at the way the taxpayers have been ripped off. Consumers' lobbies wouldn't tolerate in any commercial product such a failure to provide the service which consumers thought they were buying.

Mountains of commentary have been written about racial injustice in America. Liberal writers have engaged in collective breast-beating and finger pointing about the many facets of the race question, including segregated schools and housing, employment discriminations, and inhibitions on voting. But all those injustices together cannot add up to the injustice of failing to teach reading to the children of racial minorities while at the same time forcing them to spend 12 years sitting at desks in schools.

If some magician could remedy overnight all the injustices of discrimination against minorities in education, employment, housing, and voting, all those leap-forwards combined could not add up to what could have been done for minorities by teaching their children to read.

Whether a child sits next to a black child or a white, whether a child says a prayer in class or doesn't, whether the building is beautiful and modern or ugly and out-of-date -- all those things pale into insignificance before the preeminent question. Did the child learn how to read; or will he come out of high school with false expectations that can never be realized because he lacks the essential skills to exist as an independent citizen in modern society?

It isn't any surprise that the high illiteracy rate is matched by the failure to learn math and science skills. The students can't read the math and science books.

The U.S. educational system started down the slippery slope to failure when it pushed phonics and discipline out the door, and replaced basics skills with unproven reading methods, "life adjustment," "values clarification," "progressive education," and accommodation to the group rather than personal achievement. If General Motors is forced to recall millions of automobiles at GM's expense in order to make good its mistakes, then the schools should be required to recall their illiterate graduates and give them the skills for which they (and parents and taxpayers) have already paid.