The Fakery Of "America Reads"

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Colin Powell says that America has 15 million at-risk youths, and he has launched a massive national campaign of volunteerism to help them. We sincerely hope that some generous-spirited volunteers can make a difference in the lives of some of these at-risk youths, but the magnitude of the problem calls for finger-pointing.

These youths are at-risk primarily because of two factors: they are illiterate and they have no father in the home. The former results from the failure of the public schools to teach them how to read, and the latter results from the liberal welfare system that, for the last 30 years, has rewarded illegitimacy and made fathers irrelevant.

The costs of illiteracy are astronomical. According to the Washington Literacy Council, 75 percent of those on welfare, 85 percent of unwed mothers, and 68 percent of those arrested are illiterate.

Powell wants teenagers to be volunteers, too. On Meet the Press, he endorsed compulsory volunteer community service as a requirement for high school graduation, adding that he personally would have preferred community service to the calculus he was required to take.

Visits to the local homeless shelter are hardly going to improve U.S. students' scores on international mathematics tests.

In conjunction with the summit on volunteerism, President Clinton is sending legislation to Congress this week for his America Reads project. He wants $2.5 billion to hire 25,000 reading specialists who will supervise a million volunteers to help the 40 percent of third-graders who can't read.

Up to 11,000 of the reading specialists would be drawn from among AmeriCorps volunteers who receive living allowances and $5,000 a year for college in exchange for community service. Some 160 colleges and universities have pledged to provide thousands of other volunteer students for this learn-to-read program.

To call these subsidized college undergraduates "volunteers" and/or "reading specialists" is to admit that the whole project is phony. The omission of phonics materials from the giant $2.5 billion America Reads project is further evidence that it's all smoke and mirrors.

Clinton's Saturday radio address was full of the touchy-feely stuff for which he is so famous. "All you really need to do," he said, "is to roll up your sleeves, sit with a child and open a book together."

Let's take him at his word. But the best one to "sit with a child and open a book together" is a parent or grandparent, not a college student who has no personal interest in the child and doesn't know any more about teaching reading than the parent does.

The key to success is how the book is used. Will the tutor teach the child how to sound out the syllables and put them together in words (phonics), or will the tutor just help the child to guess at the words by looking at the pictures on the page (Whole Language)?

Clinton's proposal apparently does not include printed materials for the volunteers to use. In his radio address, he said they would "coordinate with in-school reading programs." That must mean more of the same Whole Language, since that's what most schools use.

The evidence is incontrovertible that intensive, systematic phonics is the proven way to teach children to read. When are parents going to wake up to the fact that, if their children are going to be taught to read, parents must do it themselves?

The schools won't use phonics, regardless of the evidence, and regardless of state laws that require it. The teachers' colleges are still graduating teachers who have had no more than one lecture on phonics.

Before another dime is appropriated, Congress has an obligation to find out why Title I (formerly known as Chapter 1), the largest federal K-12 education program, has failed. The final report of a five-year, $29-million longitudinal study of 40,000 students shows that this remedial program has not closed the learning gap between low-achieving students and their classmates.

The gap actually increased slightly, despite the fact that taxpayers are pouring $7.2 billion per year down the Title I drain.

The Department of Education's response to this report is to announce that it will no longer track individual improvement. The Department just awarded a contract for a new five-year evaluation to focus instead on school reforms.

The Jim Lehrer NewsHour aired a segment last week on school and parent dissatisfaction with the most widely-used drug education program, called D.A.R.E., which has failed to persuade students to say no to illegal drug use. The segment concluded that with the comment that Clinton has requested a $64 million increase in drug education funds, "and D.A.R.E. will receive most of it."

How the Republican Congress deals with Clinton's deceptive proposals to paint himself as the Education President will determine whether it was worth electing Republicans in November 1996 or we might just as well have saved our money and effort and let the AFL-CIO elect its candidates.