from Phyllis Schlafly

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The Brits are Really Reforming Education

The British Education Secretary, John Patten, is doing for his country what we devoutly wish our Education President and Secretary of Education would do for Americans. In a dramatic national policy decision this fall, he rejected the "progressive" teaching approach that has been dominant for the last 30 years and set the Brits on a course of making sure that every schoolchild will learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and speaking the English language.

Patten has a vision that each British schoolchild will write legibly, spe1l correctly, understand grammar, and have a deep respect for the rich heritage of English literature. So, h€ accepted the proposals of the National Curriculum Council (NCC) to introduce (as the British say) "greater rigor" into teaching the basics.

The rigor includes the following five specifics: to write English by learning the rules of grammar, to speak grammatically correct Standard English in both the classroom and the playground, to learn to read by the phonics method, to spel1 by methods that include learning lists of words by heart, and to appreciate the great works of English literature by being introduced to the standard literary canon.

Patten said that he realizes these proposals will be controversial, and indeed. they are. The "progressive" educators who have held sway over school policy for the last generation are fighting a last-ditch effort to continue the methodology that is responsible for the dramatic decline in academic achievement at every level.

The "progressives," headed by Professor Brian Cox of Manchester University, had urged toleration of non-Standard English such as "we was," "he ain't done it," and "she come here yesterday." The Cox Committee argued that such expressions are "rarely more than a social irritant to some people."

The NCC policy will assure that henceforth every schoolchild should be taught to speak Standard English -- the "grammatically correct language used in formal communication throughout the world" -- clearly, accurately and confidently. Patten said that learning English should lie at the heart of the national curriculum.

The most significant part of the new Patten policy is the adoption of the phonics method as the essential ingredient in teaching reading, which means sounding out words instead of guessing at words by trying to remember all their different shapes. The NCC stated that children must be taught the links between sounds and written words.

The NCC rejected the Cox Committee “progressive” viewpoint that children will “draw meaning from the printed page” just by enjoying themselves. The current school regulations, which are now scheduled to fade into history, make only a passing reference to phonics.

Whether a child is taught to read by the phonics method or is just allowed to guess at the printed page is closely related to his ability to spell. The NCC takes the position that accurate spelling is important, rejecting the Cox Committee view that too much attention is paid to the “secretarial” points of writing.

The controversy over reading, spelling and writing is not just a matter of alternative methodologies. It goes to the heart of education philosophy. Traditional schooling is based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills and appreciation of the nation's heritage, whereas “progressive” schooling disdains the rules of reading, grammar and spelling, while emphasizing experiential learning and contemporary texts.

Patten argues that these policies have led too many children up an educational blind alley. He concluded that the case for changing the method was overwhelming.

As in America, the “progressive” educators have powerful unions and are able to activate their political pals to kick up a controversy. Nigel de Gruchy of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers says that the teaching of English is now “a political football being booted up and down the right wing of the Conservative Party.”

It will be a challenge for Patten to get the new policies place, as planned, for pupils aged 5 to 14 by 1994, and for those aged 14 to 16 by l995. He is starting his task with enthusiasm. He announced that next year l-4-year-olds will be tested on their knowledge of a Shakespearian play chosen from Julius Caesar, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Romeo and Juliet.

We would all be the beneficiaries if American schools would adopt the Patten policies.