Let's Define Terms When

We Debate Education

by Phyllis Schlafly November 14, 1996

In the second presidential television debate, Bob Dole said he supports "school choice," by which he clearly meant tax-financed vouchers to allow students to go to private (and probably religious) schools. Bill Clinton responded that he, too, supports "school choice," but if you listened carefully, you would have realized that he meant only the option to transfer to another public school.

School choice obviously means one thing to some people, and something entirely different to others. Indeed, most of the jargon pertaining to public school education has double meanings.

Clinton boasted in the last TV debate that he supports charter schools. But a few days later, he said he did not support the charter school proposal that was on the ballot in the State of Washington. Nobody has figured out what the difference is.

"Outcome-based education" has been the most avant-garde public school fad for the last ten years. Don't we all want schools to identify outcomes and move forward to achieve them?

The trouble is that parents expect outcomes such as being able to read independently by the end of the first grade and being able to recite the multiplication tables by the end of the third grade. The schools, on the other hand, project such controversial outcomes as "being an environmentally responsible person" and "accepting diverse lifestyles."

When parents try to find out what their children are being taught, the schools respond with "we're teaching understanding rather than facts" because "mere facts are soon outdated." A variation of this line is, "We're teaching children how to learn rather than what to learn." We're teaching "learning to learn."

But a lot of facts are not outdated at all. Children need to be taught a great many essential facts if they are to develop understanding of the world around them.

The schools' curious animosity toward teaching subject-matter is further revealed in the slogan "We're teaching the child not the subject." Is there some secret difference, known only to people with degrees in education, between teaching Jimmy arithmetic and teaching arithmetic to Jimmy? Many parents have reasonably concluded that, under the present system, Jimmy won't learn any arithmetic at all.

Other buzz words that disguise the avoidance of teaching facts and subject-matter include "critical-thinking" and "higher-order-thinking" skills. But how can one engage in critical thinking until one knows some facts to think about?

"Developmentally appropriate" is a slogan used to allay parents' concerns and conceal the fact that children aren't learning what they should be expected to learn at given grade levels. But don't worry; there's plenty of time to learn, since the schools are now planning "lifelong learning" to monitor children all through their lives.

"Progressive" is the word used to describe the philosophy that originated with John Dewey and the Columbia Teachers College at the start of the 20th century and has held sway ever since. But how can something be "progressive" that has been in place for 90+ years with obviously declining results?

Almost every day during the last two weeks of the campaign, Bill Clinton repeated that 40 per cent of third graders can't read. That's not only a terrible indictment of the public school system and of the teachers unions; it lifts the curtain on the scandal of allowing disadvantaged children to remain in school year after year without ever learning the skill that is the sine qua non of realizing the American Dream.

Those who want to learn more about how the public school system has failed disadvantaged children and thereby fostered social inequalities should read E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s new book called "The Schools We Need." The author of the best-selling "Cultural Literacy" has produced an impressive critique of our public educational system which, he says, is "among the worst in the developed world."

Hirsch not only explains and defines the public schools' deceptive vocabulary. He makes a broadside attack on the prevailing pedagogical fads that "process" should take priority over the acquisition of knowledge, that teachers do not need to know the subjects they teach, and that it is unnatural and unfair to challenge children academically through content-based curricula.

Hirsch argues that requiring children to learn a core curriculum, using methods that emphasize hard work, learning facts, and passing tests, is the best and probably the only way to reduce social and

economic inequalities. Neither more money nor "school choice" will do the job. The children from disadvantaged families need a core curriculum with real content if they are to become successful citizens in the information-age civilization.

Toward the end of the 1996 political campaign, Dan Rather announced on the CBS Evening News that education was the number-one issue among both Republican and Democratic voters. Let's hope that we now get some straight talk about the problem and the solution.