Poll Shows Schools Are Our #1 Worry

by Phyllis Schlafly September 26, 1996

The Washington Post just conducted a public opinion poll to find out what are the top "worries" of Americans. The results are informative and useful to policymakers, officeholders, candidates, and the media.

The results are also surprising when we realize that most public opinion polls are very skewed by media coverage. For example, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole each got a bounce from the favorable news coverage they received at their own party's national convention.

Topping the list of worries in the Washington Post survey, identified by a whopping 62 percent of respondents, was this: "The American educational system will get worse instead of better." Although this worry outranked crime, drugs, taxes, health care and welfare, it is seldom if ever addressed by our national political leadership or media elite.

Ask yourself how many times you have ever seen this subject featured on the nightly television news programs of the NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, or PBS. Many subjects on which television news programs lavish most of their high- priced minutes, such as Saddam Hussein's latest outrage, didn't even rate a mention in the survey as a worry.

The American people recognize what the federal government, the education establishment and the media have failed to notice: that public schools are a disaster area and that so-called "reforms" and the influx of more and more taxpayers' money aren't doing any good. If the pollsters would question people further, here are some of the specifics they would find that Americans are worried about.

Violent crime against students and teachers inside the public schools has caused an unprecedented level of fear and intimidation. A U.S.A. Today survey found that 43 percent of public school students avoid the school restrooms because of fear.

School administrators are afraid to take any disciplinary action against criminal or gun-toting students. Governor George Allen of Virginia reported that the U.S. Department of Education threatened to withhold $50 million in special ed funds if Virginia continues to discipline criminal students.

The chief reasons why the educational system is so inferior and is getting worse is the refusal to teach basic skills and knowledge in the elementary grades and the dumbing down of the textbooks and courses of study by about three years below what it was a generation ago.

The goal of the schools now is to inculcate self-esteem in schoolchildren instead of to give them the skills necessary for individual achievement. The schools have been pumping up kids with inflated notions of their self-worth and importance, eliminating the discipline of competition, insulating them from failure, and shielding them from the knowledge that poor performance can be remedied by hard work and perseverance.

The schools have reduced the time spent on academic subjects to about one- fourth of the school day. The majority of the day is spent on psychological courses, counseling, social services, and other non-academic activities.

Even worse, these non-academic courses use a methodology that used to be called values clarification and is now known by its generic name of non-directive. That means that schoolchildren are presented with dilemmas, situations, and various problems of modern living, but given no direction as to the correct or expected behavior.

Schools have abandoned their responsibility to correct students' mistakes, all the way from encouraging "inventive spelling" in the elementary grades to "make your own choices about sex and drugs" in high school. A call to respect "family values" is meaningless to a generation that has been systematically taught that everyone can choose his own values, and that one person's values are as good as the next person's.

While the American people have accurately identified the problem that public schools aren't doing their job and are getting worse, they haven't figured out whom to blame. It's a fraud when presidential or congressional candidates promise to remedy the problem, because education is a state and local (not a federal) problem and only six percent of public school funding comes from the federal government.

The only action that federal officeholders should take is to stop imposing national mandates that override local authorities and parents' rights. Yet, most proposed and pending congressional legislation is still moving toward more federal, rather than local, control.

President Clinton's offer to spend $2.75 billion to send volunteers into the schools to teach illiterate third graders how to read is a four-dimensional sham. Teaching kids to read is not a federal responsibility, the teachers union won't allow volunteers into the classroom, the children ought to be taught how to read in the first (not third) grade, and the schools are still refusing to use the only proven method of producing good readers: intensive, systematic phonics.

The Washington Post survey is an important contribution to public discussion and policy development. It should be used by politicians and the media to address the American people's number-one worry.