The New Crisis in California

September 28, 1995 by Phyllis Schlafly

A state task force has just proclaimed that "there is a crisis in California that demands our immediate attention." No, it's not an earthquake or a hurricane or a fire.

It's the crisis that California's experiment in "progressive" teaching methods, which started in 1987 using the Whole Language philosophy, is a "failure." The state task force calls on California schools to resume teaching phonics, spelling and other basic reading skills.

The task force was appointed last spring by state Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin in response to California's bottom-of-the-barrel performance on the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress. California even came in behind Louisiana, and our nation's largest state couldn't abide that indignity!

This new report completely vindicates parents and other critics who have charged that the schools have failed in their primary mission, i.e., teaching children to read. The Whole Language method is known to parents as the word-guessing method because it teaches children to guess at the words by looking at the pictures, rather than reading by sounding out the letters and syllables.

The California task force said that children need to be systematically taught phonics, letter patterns and other decoding skills that enable them to recognize words virtually automatically. The idea that skills need to be taught explicitly, directly and systematically was ridiculed as out of date and was largely eliminated when California adopted its 1987 "framework" for reading and language arts.

California's Whole Language policy had a major effect on public schools all over the country because the millions of dollars that California spends on textbooks exercise tremendous influence over the way textbooks are written. Parents hope that the new report will have a similar national effect in bring phonics back to readers, but don't look for this to happen soon because textbook changes take years to bring about, and the resistance to phonics by the education establishment is almost religious in its intensity.

Former Superintendent Bill Honig, who oversaw the writing of the 1987 policies, published a book this summer that amounts to a confession that he was misguided. He admitted that the teaching methods adopted in 1987 are the reason why 30 to 40 percent of pupils in poverty areas never learned how to read, and that even higher percentages of students are not able to read what they are expected to read in the upper grades.

It must be salt in the wounds of thousands of children when Honig wrote that the only disability of most students who are labeled "learning-disabled" is that the schools didn't teach them how to read. How would you like to have had your child labeled "learning disabled," suffered from the belief that he was mentally defective, watched him be frustrated and embarrassed by failure in front of his classmates, and then find out later that the real problem was that the school failed to teach your child how to read?

The American taxpayers are paying $5,000+ per child per year for this inferior and fraudulent product. Why don't we hear any complaints from consumer advocates? Where is Ralph Nader when we need him?

For so many years, public schools have been adamant (even belligerent) in their refusal to teach children to read by systematic, intensive phonics. Whole Language (which is part and parcel of Outcome-Based Education) is the dominant philosophy in public schools today.

Perhaps one explanation for the schools' stubbornness in sticking with Whole Language despite massive evidence of its failure is that so much money has been invested in the materials that promote it. One example of these expensive anti-phonics materials is the third- grade video curriculum called "Storylords," a series of twelve 12- to 20-minute videos.

Here is how Storylords instructs children: (1) Try to "guess" what the story is about by looking at the pictures on the cover, reading the title, and thinking about them. (2) Try to "predict" what will happen next by looking at the pictures. (3) When you don't know a word, "skip over it. Read ahead. Look for clues to help you figure out the mystery word. . . . If you're a good word detective you'll be a good reader."

The video Storylords shows children a book with only pictures, no words, and tells them to "look for clues" to figure out what the pictures are "thinking or saying." Storylords tells children that, before reading a book, they should examine the illustrations and ask themselves, "What do I already know about this topic?" and then use that knowledge to "predict" what the story might be about.

This is a cheat on pupils, parents, and taxpayers. Guessing, predicting, and skipping over words are NOT reading. With these mischievous instructions, children will never be able to read books unless there are pictures on every page.

Incidentally, the story content of Storylords is filled with New Age characters, artifacts (e.g., a crystal ring with "powers"), and practices (visualization, communicating through the "powers" of the crystal, incantations, and the occult). Learning to read doesn't take magic or supernatural powers. It just takes intensive, systematic phonics.