from Phyllis Schlafly September 30, 1993

HOW THE SCHOOLS BETRAYED OUR CHILDREN

"Nearly half of U.S. population are poor readers, survey says." "Two-t hirds of U.S. children read below their grade level, study finds." Those September newspaper headlines reveal a supreme American tragedy.

The National Adult Literacy Survey, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, found that 90 million American adults -- almost half our adult population possess only the most rudimentary reading skills. That means they can't read street signs, instructions on medicine bottles, or fill out a job application.

This was not a casual public opinion survey of the type which typically asks questions of only a thousand people nationally. It was an in-depth study of more than 26,000 adults conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, NJ and Westat Inc. of Rockville, MD.

The study ranked Americans into five levels and related actual reading skills to daily life and work. According to the study, 49 percent of adults (90 million Americans) fall into the lowest two levels.

Don't think that these illiterates are mostly foreigners who just got off the boat. Only 25 percent of those in the lowest two levels are immigrants just learning to speak English. And get this: 4 percent of the illiterates in the lowest two levels had graduated from high school and been to college!

The survey found 31 percent of adults (61 million Americans) in the middle level, where the best they can do is to identify two facts in an article. But they will never be able to read the great books written in the English language that are part of our heritage.

The economic consequences of this lack of reading skills are massive. Those who can't read find it very difficult to hold a job at all and, when they do, they earn a median weekly income of under $250.

Many of these unfortunate illiterates are bitter about their plight and blame society for their poverty. But the fault should be placed squarely on the public schools which failed to teach them how to read in the first grade, even though the taxpayers have generously provided an average of $5,000 per first grade student.

Just as depressing as the lack of reading skills is the failure of these illiterates to realize their own handicap. The survey found that most adults who placed in the lowest literacy levels described themselves as reading and writing English "well" or "very well."

Three-fourths of adults in the lowest literacy level and an overwhelming 95 percent of those in the second-to-lowest literacy level said that their grasp of English was acceptable and that they didn't need help or further knowledge. They didn't seem to have a clue as to why they are unable to get a better job.

It sounds as if those people were taught "self-esteem" in school instead of how to read. There could be no greater indictment of the public school system and of the people who run it.

The ones who do realize they can't read are usually too embarrassed to admit it and go through life trying to hide it. Based on actual cases of adults who have come forward, they resort to dozens of subterfuges to conceal their handicap, such as getting their spouse to fill out a job application for them.

A week after receiving the bad news about adult illiteracy, we were hit with further bad news about children, which proves that the illiteracy problem will get worse in the next decade, not better.

A just-released U.S. Department of Education study disclosed that

more than two-thirds of U.S. children can't read up to their grade level (even though "grade level" expectations have been dumbed down by about two years from what they were 50 years ago). This new study was based on the testing of 140,000 students.

The Education Department found that only 25 percent of fourth graders, only 28 percent of 8th graders, and only 37 percent of 12th graders have mastered reading material for their grade levels.

Don't be under any illusion that the higher percentages in the upper grades mean that some of the kids who couldn't read fourth grade books suddenly caught up and, eight years later, were able to read 12th grade books. Most of those who couldn't read in the 4th grade just dropped out and are no longer in the count.

The study tentatively implies that long hours of watching television may be to blame for the abysmal reading skills. But it's just as likely that the kids watch television because the schools failed to teach them how to read and they didn't have anything else to do with their evenings.

Unless we are willing to become a society where only the elite can use the written language, mothers and fathers will have to assume the responsibility of teaching their own children to read. It is obvious that the public schools either can't or won't do it.