Does Mayor Bloomberg Want To Leave A Legacy?

Sept. 4, 2002

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

New York City schoolchildren start this fall's classes at a cost to the taxpayers of $11,000 per pupil. They will eat more school lunches (800,000) than any institution except the armed forces and ride on more buses than the city's public transportation system.
But if the past is any predictor of the future, 60 percent of the kids will remain illiterate or very poor readers. They will be the victims of what President George W. Bush calls the discrimination of low expectations.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has appointed Joel Klein, Bill Clinton's antitrust boss who spent four years trying to break up the Microsoft monopoly, to run the New York City schools. Despite his nonacademic background, Klein could be a spectacular choice because the public school system is the biggest monopoly in America today.

Don't count on Klein's anti-monopoly zeal, however. The teachers unions are the single biggest prop of the political power of the Democratic Party.

The public school monopoly is not just a matter of bilking the taxpayers for extravagant costs for salaries, layers of administrators, perks, buses, lunches, and buildings. The worst aspect is the ideological monopoly that prevents elementary children from learning how to read.

This ideology teaches that most children learn how to read automatically or naturally, and the non-automatic readers should be put in special education, which rakes in more federal dollars for the school, or sometimes held back a year or two, or sometimes just put in the back of the room. Anyone who questions this policy is vilified as part of a right-wing phonics conspiracy.

So, year after year, the tests report a growing number of children who do not read at grade level, and the percentages of minorities are the highest of all. Despite billions of federal Title I dollars spent to "close the gap," the gap is just as wide as ever, and the only solution offered is to impose higher taxes and more costly fads.

One of these fads is the federally subsidized $5.8-billion E-rate program to wire classrooms for the Internet in order to remedy the so- called "digital divide" between richer and poorer schools. University of Chicago researchers who studied the results in California schools just reported that Internet access did absolutely nothing to improve the test scores of schoolchildren.

It's not fads or technology that can teach children how to read. It is only teaching them to sound out the syllables of the English language, a process we call phonics.

Instead of using phonics, most public schools give elementary schoolchildren books using a "controlled vocabulary," which means a series of books that repeat the same words ad nauseam and add a few dozen more words each year for the child to memorize. Because the kids are not taught to sound out the

syllables, they can't cope with the larger vocabulary and bigger words in the upper grades, and the percentage who can't read at grade level increases each year.

The nonreaders are humiliated when called on in class. To hide their embarrassment, they become disorderly and delinquent, and end up jobless and often in prison.

But the schools have a solution for hard-to-manage nonreaders! Put them on the mind-altering drug Ritalin so they will sit down, shut up, and stop disrupting the class.

The New York Post has run a series of news stories about the horrors related by parents who have been required by schools to put their children (especially boys) on Ritalin. In one shameful case, the school coerced a boy to take a "cocktail" of drugs that his mother said turned him into a "zombie," and then filed a medical-neglect and child- abuse complaint against the mother after she stopped the medication.

The prescription of Ritalin in the New York schools became so scandalous that the New York Department of Education just sent a letter to all district superintendents stating: "Recent press accounts have reported that some school district personnel have allegedly made the admission of some students to school contingent upon parental agreement to administer Ritalin or other psychotropic medications. Please be advised that school district personnel have no authority to impose such a requirement."

Parents say this order is a good first step, but it doesn't address other forms of coercion, such as threatening to hold the child back a grade or filing child-abuse complaints with the state.

It's not just poor and vulnerable parents who are intimidated into drugging their children. The President's brother, Neil Bush, recently announced that his son, attending a private school, was misdiagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and coerced into taking Ritalin, and the family spent years resisting the medication.

If Mayor Bloomberg wants to leave a legacy when he finishes his term, nothing could be greater than a generation of New York schoolchildren being taught phonics so they can read and start on the road to living the American dream.