

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.

"Without vision, the people perish."

Why Ivan Can Read But Johnny Can't

Back in 1962, Arthur Trace wrote a book entitled What Ivan Knows That Johnny Doesn't. In that book Trace informed us that Ivan was being taught to read by phonics, and that was why Ivan was able to learn so much better than Johnny. In fact, throughout the communist world, children were taught to read by phonics, mainly so that they could read Marx and Lenin and become the engineers and scientists the state needed to be able to create its socialist utopia and great military power.

What the communist leaders did not foresee is that the high literacy of their slaves would not lead them to Marx and Lenin, but to Jefferson, Lincoln and other dissident writers. Of course, the communist masters hoped that they could prevent this by a regime of strict censorship. But in an age of computers, radios, video and audio cassettes as well as books, the flow of information, news, and ideas could not be stopped.

Today's liberated people in the East can now read anything they want, provided the books are available, and their high literacy will enable them to make up for lost time.

In the United States, on the other hand, millions of Americans have been turned into functional illiterates by their schools, and thus are effectively prevented from rising out of the underclass to which their inferior educations have condemned them. The American public education system is now the world's most effective censor because it denies millions of citizens the skills needed to become proficient readers. These functional illiterates and semi-literates are effectively cut off from mankind's greatest source of knowledge and wisdom: books. And all of this is due to the educators' insistence that American children be taught to read by the discredited look-say, whole-word, or sight method of instruction, presently being peddled as "whole language."

It Was Tried in Russia

Oddly enough, the Russians used the whole-word method back in the early days of the communist regime, but replaced it with phonics in the 1930s when it became obvious that look-say didn't work. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (Vol. 4, p. 423) describes what

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happened in its article on Primers. We quote:

"PRIMER, a textbook designed to teach reading and writing; a primary handbook for developing language and logical thinking in children.

"Illustrated primers are also among the initial means of aesthetic education. The teaching of reading and writing is accomplished by various method (the syllabic method, the phonetic method, the 'whole-words methods,' and so on); the corresponding primers are written for each method. The phonetic, analytic-synthetic method, which is the basis on which modern Soviet primers are compiled, is the most feasible method of teaching reading and writing. [Our emphasis.]

History of Russian Primers

"The first Slavic-Russian primers were the alphabet-grammar of Ivan Fedorov (L'vov, 1574), the primer of Lavrentii Zizanii (Vil'no, 1596), and the similar primer of V. Burtsov (Moscow, 1634). In the 17th century the best primer was the illustrated one by Karion Istomin (1694); it contained drawings of the objects in each lesson. In the 16th to 18th centuries, primers were composed according to the letter-by-letter method. In the mid-19th century primers composed according to the syllabic method and then the phonetic method (F. Studitskii, 1846; V. Zolotov, 1860) appeared. In 1864, K. D. Ushinskii created the first Russian primer constructed according to the analytic-synthetic sound method. The New Alphabet by L. N. Tolstoi, compiled according to the so-called aural method, appeared in 1875. The successors of Ushinskii . . . made a number of improvements in the analytic-synthetic sound method and in primers themselves.

Look-Say in Russia

"The first Soviet primers, compiled according to the so-called whole-words method, were replaced in 1932 by primers in which the analytic-synthetic

sound method was revived (P. O. Afanas'ev and N. A. Kostin). Since then all primers have been compiled according to this method. [Our emphasis.] In 1937 the primers of A. V. Iankovskaia and N. M. Golovin were approved, and in 1945 they were replaced by the primers of A. I. Voskresenskaia and S. P. Redozubov. The Academy of Pedagogical Sciences created a primer (1953) and a new standard grammar (1965) based on Redozubov's primer. This latest grammar was the first in which the Academy of Arts and Soviet writers participated; as a result, this primer is distinguished from earlier ones by its abundance of artistic texts and color pictures illustrating objects and concepts. The Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the USSR is conducting further experimental work on the improvement of primers."

The Dewey Influence

It was John Dewey and his colleagues who visited Soviet Russia in the early days of the communist regime and persuaded Lenin's wife Krupskaya to adopt the new progressive curriculum, which included whole-word reading instruction, for Soviet primary schools. The whole-word method had been developed in the United States by the progressives in their endeavor to transform the American school into an instrument of social change. In the new curriculum, high literacy was to be downgraded in favor of socialization.

High literacy produced individuals with independent intelligence who could stand on their own two feet and think for themselves. Such individuals were unfit for the collectivist society the progressives were trying to build. In place of high literacy the progressives conceived of a sort of low-level, utilitarian reading skill that would serve the purposes of a working class ruled by an intellectual elite. In theory, the new curriculum would create the new socialist man, divested of individualism and totally devoted to the collective.

The Soviet Experiment

And so the new method was put in Soviet schools before it was even ready for American schools. In fact, the Soviet schools served as full-fledged experimental labs where American progressive ideas could be tested. And they were.

In 1922, Anna Louise Strong, a graduate of the University of Chicago, went to Russia where she investigated the new Soviet education. In February 1924, in an article in Survey Graphic, she wrote: "Their idea is modeled more on the Dewey ideas of education than anything else we know in America. Every new book by Dewey is grabbed and translated into Russian for consultation. Then they make their own additions."

The purpose of Soviet education was, in the words of a Soviet teacher, "to teach the child collective action. We are trying to fit him to build a socialist state. We have our self-governed school community, in which teachers, children and janitors all have equal voice. It decides everything, what shall be done with the school funds, what shall be planted in the school garden, what shall be taught. If the children decide against some necessary subject, it is the teacher's job to show them through their play and life together that the subject is needed." (School and Society, 3/1/24)

Soviets Junk Deweyism

However, the Dewey-Soviet experiment came to an abrupt end in August 1932 when the Central Committee of the Communist Party abandoned the laboratory method and ordered a structured curriculum. The reaction of American progressives to the news was predictable. Dr. Lucy L. W. Wilson, a principal of a Philadelphia high school who had visited Russia, wrote the following report in School and Society (1/28/33):

"The consternation in the camps of educational progressives in this country caused by the decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union . . . was far greater than was any joy among the stalwarts. Probably few of the latter cared to understand the Soviet educational experiments, and fewer still sympathized with their aims and ideals or even believed in their existence. But the believers in progressive education . . . have been rejoicing to see in the Russian educational program an attempt to give the masses in its state-supported public schools the kind of education that some private schools in this country and in Europe have been striving earnestly to give to the relatively few who come to them. Hence their present disappointment.

"It is true that the masterful teachers in the Soviet schools have been remarkably successful in developing healthy and strong boys and girls, active, courageous, independent in thought and in action, struggling valiantly for the interests of the working class -- as they saw them. But sometimes -- not always -- these same children have been a bit weak in reading, writing and arithmetic as well as in definite factual knowledge in physics, in chemistry, in mathematics, in geography and in history -- subjects now included in the three Rs of the 'fully literate' in newest Russia.

Engineers and Technicians Needed

"These healthy, strong, courageous, independent boys and girls with scrappy and uneven funds of information and an imperfect grasp of mathematics and physics have not developed into the fully competent engineers, technicians and managers demanded by Five Year Plans, old and new. . . .

More than a year ago the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in its educational resolution sounded the warning:

"The basic defects at the present moment is that instruction in the schools does not give a sufficient amount of general educational subjects and does not satisfactorily solve the problem of preparing for the higher schools fully literate people well acquainted with the basic subjects of study.'

"This pronouncement was followed by an investigation into the educational accomplishments of the graduates of a group of village schools. A third of them were found to write illiterately

Back to Basics

"A little later, Andre Budnov, commissar of education, demanded that more time be given to basic subjects, that they be better organized, reintroducing the older teaching methods, if necessary, and spending less time on extra-curricular projects, linking them directly to the formal school work. . . .

"The decree proposes a reduction and redistribution of subject-matter material, especially in mathematics and science, for the last three years of the seven-year school (equivalent to our junior high grades). . . . Not only must more time be given to mathematics, but it must be better coordinated with physics and chemistry. . . . Also every child completing these grades must have the command of one language in addition to his own."

The Failure of Progressivism

And so, the Dewey experiment was canned, and the Russians went back to teaching their children to read by the phonics method. American opponents of progressive education hoped that its failure in the Soviet Union would cause its advocates in the U.S. to see the folly of their ways. One such opponent, Prof. William C. Bagley of Columbia University, made his views known in School and Society (1/14/33). He wrote:

"I have before me a translation of the decree This document states categorically that while the committee had decreed in September, 1931, that 'no one method should be accepted as fundamental,' the 'laboratory' method has been so regarded in many schools and with unfortunate results.

"The decree directs the commissariats of education in the several republics of the Union 'to liquidate these perversions of the laboratory method.' . . . Hereafter the 'accepted form of teaching in both the elementary and secondary schools must be classroom recitation based on a strict schedule and designed for a definite group of pupils.' The decree sweeps 'psychological' organization into the discard and enthrones hard-boiled 'logical' organization. The teacher is to present his subject 'in a systematic and sequential way, the pupils to be trained in the use of text-books.' . . .

Reviving the Three R's

"Special attention, too, must be given to a thorough grounding in the three R's. 'A final examination at the end of the year is compulsory for all pupils.' Beyond all this, principals and teachers (who according to the decree have been paying 'no heed to the violation of order in the school') are to be 'held responsible for the maintenance of discipline among the pupils,' with full authority to 'expel for from one to three years incorrigible pupils who insult the school personnel, violate the school rules, and are guilty of destroying or ravaging school property.' . . .

"Now if all this does not constitute as nearly complete an 'about face' as modern education records, our American educational pilgrims to the land of the Soviets have been giving us false reports. Ever since the organization of the Soviet schools, Russia has been the Mecca of the advocates of the Progressive theories, which emphasize pupil-freedom, pupil-initiatives,

pupil-experiences, pupil-activities and the breaking down of subject-matter boundaries. These were reflected in Soviet school practice more faithfully and on a wider scale than anywhere else in the world.

"Russia has been indeed the most favorable field for the exploitation of the Progressive doctrines, for the new school system, starting so to speak from 'scratch,' was emphatically free from the 'stranglehold of tradition' which, the progressives have assured us, is the great obstacle encountered by their doctrines in other countries. . . .

The Need for Competence

"The official rejection of progressivism and the acceptance of the ideals of system, order and discipline is an event of outstanding significance. The Soviets' stake in an efficient school system is plain. Staring them in the face is the imperative need of a generation of men and women who will have the strength and the competence essential to the realization of the successive Soviet 'Plans.' An educational theory that is inherently weak as a theory and inevitably enfeebling in its results can not produce such a generation. Apparently the leaders have found this out and have proceeded to jettison the theory in order to save the ship. . . .

"In our country, the need for strength and competence is probably just as great, but it is not so clearly discernible. A great plan is not at stake -- for we have no plan. And in addition to this, our profession and a goodly segment of the public have been so thoroughly hypnotized by the appealing features of progressive education that they are quite insensitive to its fundamental weaknesses. The very terms used in our professional discussions load the dice in its favor -- calling it 'new,' for example, and contrasting it with what has been increasingly referred to as the 'traditional.' . . .

"American educational theory has too long been committed by a limited psychology and an essentially opportunistic philosophy to a debilitating hedonism. It would be difficult to conceive of a more unfortunate educational basis for the critical years that so clearly lie ahead."

The Progressives Push On

But our progressive educators had no intention of abandoning their plans, despite their failure in the Soviet Union. The new whole-word reading programs (Dick and Jane) were now being adopted by the public schools of America, and even though these teaching methods had produced poor results in Russia, the progressives were determined to inflict them on American children.

The results were predictable. Complaints about the new teaching methods were numerous but confidently ignored by the progressives who stuck to their agenda. One such complaint by Robert P. Carroll of Pennsylvania State College was published in School and Society (1/1/38). Although written in 1938, it could have been written last week:

"During the last few years it seems that interest in the teaching of reading has increased tremendously throughout the country in general. Various books and articles have been written about the matter, but a number of points have not yet been made clear. Both clarity and logic seem to be lacking especially in the teaching of beginners.

"Some have condemned the old method of teaching the letters and phonics, but assume that pupils should get them somehow along the way. They are also opposed to the use of the flash card, maintaining that pupils should learn words from the context. The idea is that we should surround pupils with a lot of interesting books and let them 'read and read.' The mystery is, how

are pupils who do not know words, phonics nor letters going to take up a book and get anything whatever out of the context? How could a group of American adults take up a lot of interesting books in Chinese and learn right away to read without any previous knowledge of the words or characters?

Sound Teaching Needed

"No one would think of asking a man to build a house if he knew nothing about the materials to be used, the tools, and the like. Why not be equally sound in the teaching of reading? Learning to read certainly is a matter of building, of developing, of acquiring more and more. If a child does not have the tools with which to build, he simply can not build. . . .

"It has been stated by many educational leaders that to teach children their letters would interfere with their 'earmarking' words; that it would cause them to break up the word into letters instead of seeing the word as a whole. If a child learns a word by sight and later learns his letters and learns to spell the word, he then has to break it up. In considering the potency of recent reactions, will not this 'delayed' breaking up of the word interfere more with his reading than if he put the word together at first and remembered it as he made it? In other words, if the breaking up has to come some time, why is it not better to do the breaking at the beginning or else to build in the beginning and never have any more emphasis on the parts of the word? . . .

Proof of Failure

"In the October, 1936, issue of the Journal of the National Education Association, page 205, Dr. Arthur I. Gates refers to the fact that 'At the end of grade three, at least 40 per cent of all pupils fall below the norms . . . shown to be the minimum required

for handling the fourth grade reading curriculum without handicap.'

"If present methods are producing such poor results it seems that we should begin to try something different. The great trouble is that the foundation work is poor. There are too many things that pupils know only vaguely. They are greatly confused and know little about how to help themselves out of the maze. If they recognize a group of letters they do not know what sound or word the group makes. Another handicap coming from not learning the alphabet and the order of the letters is that pupils have difficulty in using a dictionary in the higher grades. . . .

Poor Spelling

"Furthermore, the 'sight method' may be partly the cause of some pupils being poor spellers, the first impression of a word being casual and giving the wrong idea about the sequence of the letters.

"Uncertainty, haziness and vagueness are great handicaps to the most capable adults. It seems logical to assume that they are greater handicaps to children. In order to avoid these factors in the education of the child it would seem that we should begin with the most elementary things and teach them thoroughly; that we should teach thoroughly the tools for learning. This would include the alphabet, phonics, spelling and writing."

As we said, this letter could have been written last week about "whole language."

And so, it is more than obvious that the progressives knew exactly what their theories would do in practice to American education -- since they were so thoroughly tried in the Soviet Union. Yet our educators act today as if no such experiment ever took place.

Déjà Vu

Reading what the promoters of "whole language" write today ought to give us a sense of déjà vu. But they are counting on the ignorance, bewilderment, and indifference of the public to let them get away with their schemes. It is unlikely that the public will react until the damage becomes so obvious that it can no longer be ignored. By then, the educators will have invented many more esoteric reasons for student failure. Governors will convene, meetings will be held, experts will pontificate, the President will babble, and legislators will vote billions more for education reform. By then the educators will be singing their theme song: "We did it before, and we can do it again!"

Sweden's Socialist Education System Is Falling Apart

Sweden's dream of creating equal opportunity for all through an ambitious state school system is turning into a costly nightmare.

Teachers have gone on strike. Students have demonstrated against dilapidated buildings and outdated books. And an official survey shows that schools have done nothing to change social class patterns.

The Social Democratic government says it spends more on primary and secondary education than any other country -- about \$7,000 per pupil a year -- and its commitment has been the envy of educators around the world.

But now, after decades of investment, even the government admits all is not well.

"The Swedish school system has major flaws. It is not working as it should despite being the most expensive

in the world," said School Minister Goran Persson.

A survey published in August 1989 by the National Bureau of Statistics spotlighted a setback in the drive toward equality by the Social Democrats, who have ruled Sweden for all but 12 of the past 72 years.

It showed that only 10 percent of children coming from working-class homes received high marks in Swedish language when they finished nine years of compulsory education at the age of 16. The figure was 70 percent for children of white-collar parents.

Socialist Policies

"Social Democratic policy has hit hardest those pupils whom it was supposed to favor," Conservative Party leader Carl Bildt wrote in an article. Government officials say they overestimated the ability of education to change social patterns.

Critics blame school policies that stress the virtues of critical thinking, methodology and cooperation among pupils rather than old-fashioned facts and figures.

"When schools relax learning requirements, it naturally affects children from families without academic traditions who receive little compensation at home," Bildt said.

Swedish children start school at the age of 7 but receive no marks until 8th and 9th grade. Their final marks, at 16, provide the sole basis for admittance to theoretical three-or four-year secondary schools that lead to college.

A State Curriculum

A state education board sets a nationwide curriculum that all schools must follow. Private schools are discouraged and play a marginal overall role.

"Absenteeism is on the rise. Educational standards are deteriorating. Thousands of children leave school without being able to read and write properly," Anders Lonn, a Stockholm primary school teacher, said. "What can you do without marks?"

International surveys in 1964 and 1980 partly support his claim. Swedish pupils came out almost at the bottom in mathematics while scoring among the best in the world of natural sciences.

Despite the money spent on Swedish education, school buildings and books are falling to pieces as a result of ballooning costs. A recent report by Stockholm's Labor Inspection Board -- citing inadequate maintenance, ventilation, lighting, and lavatories -- concluded that most of the city's schools provided a working environment inferior to the country's jails.

Sweden: A Nation at Risk

Some Swedish schools have even turned to local business sponsors in order to offer pupils new school books.

"There used to be a time when we were proud to give foreign visitors guided tours of our school. Not any more," one Swedish headmaster said.

"Sweden today is a nation whose future is at risk. . . . We need a national all-out effort to boost educational standards," said Bildt. (The Buffalo News, 12/31/89)

Comment:

Progressive education did not work in the Soviet Union, it hasn't worked in Sweden, and it has just about destroyed the American public school system. But there is no sign that American progressive educators have any intention of abandoning the basic failed philosophy responsible for our ongoing educational crisis.

The Swedes admit that their education program has failed the very children it was supposed to benefit the most -- those from working-class families. In America, the failure is even more staggering. Millions of the poor have been relegated to lives of permanent poverty in the underclass by schools that failed to teach them basic academic skills. A system that has produced such colossal failure will hardly be improved by progressive "restructuring."

Maine and Missouri Proclaim Home Education Week

Gov. John J. McKernan, Jr., of Maine and Gov. John Ashcroft of Missouri have signed proclamations honoring Home Education Week in 1990 in their respective states. In Missouri Home Education Week will be celebrated May 1-7; in Maine May 6-12.

Donna Fortney, Secretary of Missouri's statewide home-school association, Families for Home Education, writes in the March 1990 issue of FHE's magazine:

"Yes, Governor Ashcroft has granted us the proclamation again this year! As most of you will recall, last year was the first; and it was a tremendous success, as home school support groups and individuals across Missouri participated in numerous public awareness campaigns in honor of our week. And remember the rally in Jeff City?! The Rotunda was packed on all levels, as we sang, addressed, cheered and let our voices be heard throughout the Capitol!

"Let's do it all again, only bigger, better, and louder!"

The proclamation in Maine was obtained through the efforts of Bettina Dobbs, president of Guardians of Education in Maine (GEM). This is Maine's third consecutive Home Education Week.