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It Takes Government to Create a Reading Crisis **by Sheldon Richman**

When Horace Mann and his colleagues launched the public-school movement some 175 years ago, they made extravagant promises. Turn the education of children over to enlightened altruistic experts working under government auspices, they said, and illiteracy, vice, and crime will become things of the past.

I'm not kidding.

Most people don't know about these promises, so they don't know how badly the government's schools have failed by their own standards. Apologists for state schooling often defend their abysmal record by saying that no one should expect the government's teachers and administrators to efficiently educate children who bring all of society's problems with them to the classroom. But that's what the founders of what used to be called the "common school" pledged.

The broken promises continue. The schools have a hard time teaching reading. Consider the U.S. Department of Education's latest literacy figures. The department's press release began thus: "American adults can read a newspaper or magazine about as well as they could a decade ago, but have made significant strides in performing literacy tasks that involve computation, according to the first national study of adult literacy since 1992." Of course, this raises the question of how well adults could read a newspaper or magazine a decade ago. Therein lies the tale.

The department defines literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." Now let's look at what percentage of high-school graduates, college graduates, and graduate-school students and degree-holders qualified as "proficient" in the three kinds of tasks used in the study. The three tasks are "prose," able to perform tasks using continuous texts; "document," able to perform tasks using noncontinuous texts in different formats; and "quantitative," able to do computations with numbers embedded in printed material. "Proficiency" is defined as having the "skills necessary to perform more complex and challenging literacy activities."

According to the study, in 1992, 5.3 percent of the high-school graduates tested were proficient in the three kinds of tasks. In the latest study (2003) this percentage dropped to 4.6.

For college graduates the percentages were 36 in 1992 and 29 in 2003.

For graduate students or holders of graduate degrees, the percentage went from 45 to 36.

When the three kinds of tasks are broken down, we find no improvement in the ten years. The best that can be said is that in a couple of categories, the results were unchanged.

Results were slightly different for changes in the “intermediate” literacy category, defined as having skills to perform “moderately challenging literacy activities.” The percentage of high-school graduates in this category declined slightly from 44 to 42 in the ten years. For college graduates and graduate-level students, there were increases, from 48 to 53 for the former category and from 45 to 50 for the latter.

When you look at the percentages in the basic literacy and below-basic categories for high-school and college graduates and graduate-level students, the results are downright depressing. In many cases the ranks of these categories have grown; in others they improved a little or stayed the same.

This is hardly a ringing endorsement of government schooling. Despite what the state’s teachers and experts might imply, learning to read is not that difficult. Children used to teach themselves with only light guidance from a parent. It takes a government to create a national reading crisis.

These results will undoubtedly be used to justify more government spending on education. President Bush is proposing more than a \$100 million to promote education in foreign languages — in the name of fighting terrorism. (Oh, please!) It is time we stopped being fooled by the people who are responsible for the education mess. As if we needed more evidence, this latest study shows that it’s time to separate school and state.

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