

Our Schools, Dumb and Dumber

By Alan Caruba

As the nation's children return to elementary and secondary schools, it is increasingly essential that their parents and communities coast to coast realize how poorly served they are and how their learning environment is increasingly tainted by a socialist agenda.

Our nation's schools have long been factories of boredom, centers of academic incompetence. High school graduation rates have been in a fairly steady decline. At its peak in 1969, the rate was 77 percent. By 2007 it was 68.8 percent.

In mid-August, The Wall Street Journal reported that "New data show that fewer than 25% of 2010 graduates who took the ACT college-entrance exam possessed the academic skills necessary to pass entry-level courses, despite modest gains in college-readiness among U.S. high school students in the last few years."

What caught my eye was a quote from Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, who said that "if our kids aren't dropping out physically, they are dropping out mentally."

The subject of education is important because they are the generation to which the future of the nation must be entrusted and "A recent study found the U.S. ranks only 12th in the percentage of adults aged 25 to 34 who hold college degrees."

The failure of our nation's schools, to my mind, coincides with the creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1979, signed into law by President Jimmy Carter, and which began operating on May 16, 1980.

The word "education" does not appear in the U.S. Constitution and, until the Department of Education came along, it was the responsibility of States and local communities. A government that has managed Conrail since 1976 without once making a profit should not have been trusted with the nation's educational system.

I opposed No Child Left Behind when former President Bush proposed it and, like former President Reagan, I have long believed the Department of Education should be ended and that responsibility be returned to the States and local communities. The DOE exists today as little more than an obstacle to learning in the classroom and a giant funding machine.

The DOE is pretty much owned by the National Education Association which is not an "association", but a powerful union, the largest with an estimated 3.2 members. The Democrat Party is heavily indebted to it for funds and campaign workers.



It is doubtful that most Americans know that, for the past several months, the NEA's website has recommended that its members read "Rules for Radicals" by the late Saul Alinsky, a dedicated communist. If NEA members adopt its political agenda, the enemy will literally be in our nation's classrooms.

It has not gone unnoticed that Obama's "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act", otherwise known as the "Stimulus Act" enabled the education lobby to suck up billions more from taxpayers.

The Act allocated \$5 billion to early learning programs, including the failed Head Start and Early Head Start, child care and programs for children with special needs. It also allocated \$77 billion for "reforms" to allegedly strengthen elementary and secondary education, including \$48.6 billion to "stabilize" state education budgets. It was a Full Employment Act for teachers and school administrators.

Apparently those billions were not enough because on August 11, President Obama signed a bill authorizing an additional \$10 billion to states for education salaries. The Senate was so concerned the money might be spent for other purposes it included a provision that the money could not be used for anything else.

It apparently was not enough because in July the NEA president, Dennis Van Roekel, was calling for a complete overhaul of the No Child Left Behind Act, one that is entirely test-based without any notice of the fact that individual children learn at different rates. He didn't much like the Obama Race to the Top program where schools competed for grants if they demonstrated any improvement in learning and graduation rates. Another \$3.4 billion in grants is at yet unspent. Roekel didn't like the idea of competition.

Clearly, schools that are graduating students ill-prepared to go onto college and that continue to experience high dropout rates are doing something wrong. Putting kids into teach-to-the-test straight jackets is not working.

In a new book by Dr. Tim Elmore, "Generation iY: Our Last Change to Save Their Future", the author who founded a non-profit organization, Growing Leaders, writes that "I have spoken to employers who told me they will never hire another new graduate. I have heard teachers say they can hardly wait for retirement since they can't do a thing about kids today. I've had parents confide in me that they don't know what to do with their kids except scream at them."

Statistics published by UNESCO and the CIA reveal that, while American students spend twelve years in school, ranking them first out of a hundred, they rank fifteenth out of twenty-seven in terms of literacy. Their math and science scores are poor. They poll at 35%, fifth out of seventeen, for their dislike of school, and 61%, second out of seventeen, find school boring.

The schools are failing, the students are being cheated of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to become productive adults, and the U.S. government thinks that, if it just spends a few more billions, this will change. It won't.

The federal government must get out of the education business, must devolve responsibility back to the states and local communities, and they in turn should refuse to deal with teachers unions in order to regain control over the education of the nation's most precious resource, its children.

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