

# A Message to Parents

An excerpt from *Wisdom and Eloquence* by Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans

In the late 1980's, while serving as a university professor, I (Littlejohn) grew increasingly concerned each year over how ill prepared many of my students seemed for college-level work. As my own children approached school age, my wife and I didn't believe that we were equipped to teach our children at home, but we knew that we would likely have to personally supplement our children's formal educations if they were going to be prepared for college and for life.

Our suspicions were first confirmed when our son entered first grade in the local public school. As the only class member who had attended a private kindergarten, he had not learned the eighteen sight words his new classmates had memorized the previous year. All the class activities and games were based on these few words, and he was embarrassed that his classmates did well at these while he was clueless. He believed that he was the only kid in the class who could not read, and he was crushed by the experience.

When we talked to his teacher, we learned that none of the children could read. They just recognized these eighteen sight words, and home "reading" assignments were accompanied by a strict charge from the teacher not to venture beyond a certain page (lest parents stumble into new words and discover that their child was not reading). The teacher explained, as if she were speaking for the whole educational establishment, "We really don't know how children learn to read. It just happens." What we understood her to be actually acknowledging was of even greater concern and an ominous sign for our son—and, we suspected, for many children across the nation. This well-credentialed, state-certified teacher did not know how to teach children the skill of reading, and she had been convinced somehow that this was normal and that no one else knew either. It was entirely up to the child to discover the skill through exposure to various "reading-related" activities cheerfully facilitated by well-meaning "teachers." My response was to buy a phonics book and teach my son to read. Soon, and for some time, he was the only student in class who really could read. But from grade one, we were already faced with supplementing his education! However, our ability to continue supplementing was soon lost as the onslaught of nightly "busywork" assignments began to increase. There was no time to complete school assignments and actually learn something from Mom and Dad at home.

Had we stumbled onto an isolated occurrence? Was our son's teacher the only first grade teacher who hadn't been trained to do the job of preparing her students for a literate life? Not by a long shot. Over many years of interviewing dozens of teachers I have never had a fresh college graduate volunteer to teach first grade. These candidates knew that first grade teachers in our schools would be expected to teach nonreaders to read (a very measurable outcome), and they didn't know how. How could this be?

It turns out that colleges of education across our nation are short-changing our future elementary school teachers. University education courses survey various reading, writing, and math curricula and methodologies but rarely teach our future teachers how to actually teach “the three Rs.” Teaching candidates have typically learned how to “facilitate discovery,” how to encourage children to learn on their own, but not how to teach. Now, it is true that children can learn through independent discovery. When a child sticks her finger into an electrical socket, she discovers something on her own. But reading skills, writing skills, and basic mathematics skills cannot be discovered independently. Bright children do learn with the help of television learning programs, but in any case, they must be taught. Sadly, our nation’s schools are filled with children who cannot perform these basic skills because teachers have not been taught how to teach them. In fact, most conventionally trained teachers who entered the field after the 1930s are completely ignorant of a definite pedagogy (method of teaching and learning) of literacy. Those who entered the field before the thirties are, of course, no longer teaching.

Let us hasten to say that the teachers are not to blame for this troubling state of affairs. Every teacher we have trained, every teacher who has acquired, either in-house or at our national conferences, the easily obtainable and (like bicycle riding) unforgettable skill of teaching children to read has been thrilled to teach reading. Further, it is common in our schools for every first grader (even those identified as possessing “specific learning disabilities”) to read a magazine off the coffee table by Christmas.

I was surprised and amused when a Master’s-trained reading specialist arrived at our school and asked to observe the first-grade classroom. After spending a day with the class, she came to my office in a very excited state. She explained that her own experience was that she could not read Dr. Seuss (not having previously memorized his nonsensical words) before learning in her Master’s program the research based methodology that she now employed with individual children to correct their reading deficiencies by teaching them to decode English words. Her excitement was in observing the success of the same methodologies applied to a class of twenty-four children at once. She was delighted and surprised to see how well the methods worked in a classroom setting.

As one who has educated students from kindergarten to college, I can assert that nothing in all of education gives greater satisfaction than seeing a child’s world open before him as he learns to read. But teachers are being denied this joy by schools of education that have forgotten the wonder, even the necessity, of such things. But it is unfair even to lay blame at the feet of these educators who are themselves caught up in a decades-long stream of modernist thinking. Consider the experience I had while serving as academic vice president for an academically rigorous denominational college. I challenged our reading specialist to attend the workshop I was hosting to prepare teachers to use a research-based approach to teaching reading. I asked her to report back to me, giving me an objective assessment of the method from the perspective of her professional preparation. The professor was excited when she reported back that despite her initial (and understandable) skepticism, she had recognized that the approach thoroughly integrated a variety of techniques that she had taken years to gather into an eclectic approach and that the method she observed did it more effectively. In the end,

she became a strong proponent of such methods and has employed them as a personal ministry of faith in inner-city settings to open the world of literacy to urban children.

Of course, the crisis is not limited to the first grade or to the teaching of the “three Rs.” Consider a study presented in the journal *Physics Today* in 1989. Comparing math performance among thirteen-year-olds in six countries, Korean children scored first, while American teens scored dead last. When asked how they felt about their math abilities, 67 percent of American children believed they were good in math, while 77 percent of the Koreans thought they were not good in math. This study and others like it have been widely criticized by conventional educators, but the lesson here is easily understood. It should be no surprise that the American kids outperformed their competitors in the self-esteem department while being trounced in academics. The teachers who taught those kids their math were themselves trained in programs and by professors who emphasized the emotional comfort of children over rigorous intellectual exercise and accountability for knowledge. In reality, both are important, but nothing boosts the confidence of a child like genuine learning, and nothing is so satisfying to a young scholar as the actual mastery of essential learning skills.

Consider further the 1994 study reported by the Capital Research Center, which showed that only 32 percent of public high school seniors could “read proficiently.” Thirty-one percent could not read even at “a basic level.” Even more shocking, perhaps, was that less than half the seniors in private schools were proficient readers, and 16 percent of private-school students could barely read at all! This study too has been widely challenged, but we must still ask some difficult questions. How did things get so bad in our nation’s education systems, and why are the private school students often performing little better than their public-school counterparts?

Let’s take a look at some history. From ancient times, educators held that it was each generation’s responsibility to pass along to the next the skills, knowledge, and virtues necessary to engage their culture intelligently and to be positive contributors to and leaders in society. Since the time of Christ, nothing has shaped human thought and culture more than Christianity and the Bible. However, with the dawn of the philosophical age known as the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, a new way of thinking began to spread that would eventually lead both to the rejection of Christian influences on learning and (strangely enough) to uncertainty about the need to teach children a positive set of intellectual skills or an absolute core of cultural knowledge. Many current educators scoff at the notion of teaching children basic learning skills. Others laugh at their own colleagues who promote cultural literacy and the importance of teaching a common core of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Equally worrisome is the pervasive confusion about teaching values. Of the three (skills, knowledge and values), however, values confusion may be the most understandable. After all, in school systems serving a pluralistic society, whose values (if any) should be woven into the fabric of the curriculum? For patriotic Americans, it is a bit of a conundrum that our democratic political structure dictates that the values of the majority (or an activist minority) will be represented. Despite our commitment to democratic principles, it is a dangerous thing to have the quality of my child’s education determined democratically.

Another significant contributor that affected these trends in American education is worth addressing here. With the rise of modernist thinking over the past several decades and the accompanying cultural elevation of science throughout our culture, science departments at our nation's universities began to flourish as government and foundation grants poured in for supporting grand experiments. Not wanting to be left out, "social scientists," including professors of education, soon began to engage in "scientific" experimentation so that they, too, could attract extramural funding for their departments. The effect has been cataclysmic for our nation's schools.

When a biologist experiments on guinea pigs, the "guinea pigs" are, in fact, guinea pigs. If the biology experiment "fails," you scrap it and start a new experiment with new guinea pigs. But when professional educators and graduate students in education (who are pressured to do something entirely new) conduct educational experiments, their "guinea pigs" are children, yours and mine. The unintended consequence of the educator's empirical approach is that when a widely supported educational experiment fails, a whole generation of children loses out on the education they could and should have had. Still, the colleges of education (and after them our nation's schools) move from one failed approach to the next, even abandoning the rare method that works in favor of the newest and latest educational fad.

Yet, this is only part of the story. It turns out that conventional schools don't really spend that much time educating children anyway. Most of the time is spent on enculturation. Enculturation is what naturally occurs in children while they are growing up. It comprises influences of parents, teachers, pastors, peers, television, music, and video games, to name a few.

John Westerhoff, professor of theology and Christian nurture at Duke Divinity School, summarizes the situation well:

In point of fact, schools may have become the most significant primary association in contemporary society. By the time children are 12 years of age, they have spent more hours in school than they have spent with their families and religious community combined. Indeed it would take 75 years of attending church and church school regularly to equal the school's influence in the first 12 formative years of a person's life. Further, schools are not solely instructional institutions in which reading, writing, and arithmetic are taught. Schools are fundamentally agents of enculturation. As Phillip Jackson notes, more than 90% of the time a child spends in school is spent on enculturation, while only 10% is spent on instruction. The hidden curriculum of the school (i.e., enculturation) is, it appears, more influential than the stated curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

It is frightening to realize that the educational establishment has stopped educating our children and has begun, instead, to instill in them values and notions about our culture and society that are often not our own. Worse still, our best teachers at schools, both public and private (like fish swimming against the current from a broken dam), are helpless to do anything substantive about it. Even if they

could, it would take too long for any given child within the system to realize the benefit from it. The sad truth is that universal education reform just doesn't work. Unless educators find a drastically different structural framework, a wholly distinct paradigm for education, there can be no lasting change. It is just such a paradigm (one that integrates genuine, historically proven, effective scholasticism with historic Christian principles and character) that we present in this small volume. We believe it to be a paradigm best (if not exclusively) grasped one school—one "community of faith and learning"—at a time.

I was privileged for seven years to serve and now serve again at such a school. As a result, I have observed firsthand the benefits of such an education and have seen my own children and hundreds of others grow in their love both for Christ and for learning. It has delighted me to hear my own children arguing over the proper conjugation of a Latin verb rather than over who gets to play the video game. I swelled with pride when an antique shop owner gave my twelve-year-old daughter a crusty Latin book because she was the only person to ever pick it up and read it (translate it) aloud. I love losing an argument to my son, who has had more formal instruction in logic and classical rhetoric than I can ever hope to acquire on my own. It delights me to read his acknowledgment, now that he has graduated from college, that his liberal arts and sciences primary and secondary education has shaped his life: He "values education and the ability to reason." He "cares about what he has learned." His education "turned him on to things he has learned to love, such as public speaking, persuasion, debate, and reasoning." And it "taught him how to reason and articulate his thoughts so he could persuade others, and be a stronger leader." Most important, as my children have matured into young adults, I have been humbled to recognize deep Christian character in their response to the challenges and even crises they have faced in life.

Fifteen years after the founding of New Covenant Schools in Lynchburg, Virginia, the rigor of the basic curriculum and consequently the average SAT scores there and at similar schools founded since (including those the authors currently serve) tend to exceed the standards for entrance into prestigious colleges and university honors programs. Our students wouldn't mind my saying that they are not geniuses. Like my own children, they are ordinary young people who have had an extraordinary education. It is that education about which we write. That education, expressed in its various forms and contexts, excites us. We are convinced that it provides an extraordinary way, perhaps even the best of a handful of good ways, to educate young people—particularly in today's postmodern culture.

1. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987
2. Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff, *Schooling Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).