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June 14, 1984

Mr. Samuel Blumenfeld
6 Roseclair Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02125

Dear Mr. Blumenfeld:

Thank you very much for testifying on June 7 at the hearing on Senate Joint Resolution 138, the National Commission on Teacher Education Act.

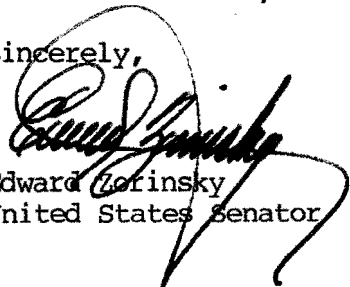
Your testimony was excellent and certainly supported the need for a Commission such as the one I have proposed. I regret that a conflict with another committee hearing made it necessary for me to pass over some of the questions I would have liked to ask, but the important points were made.

I appreciate your taking time away from your busy schedule to come to Washington, and hope we will be successful in our efforts.

Again, thank you for your support.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,



Edward Zorinsky
United States Senator

EZ/ek/md

Testimony by Samuel L. Blumenfeld given before the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities on June 7, 1984 regarding S.J. Res. 138.

About a year and a half ago an American collegiate debating team toured the Soviet Union for two weeks. During one debate, a Soviet man in the audience asked the Americans a very embarrassing question. He said:

"Recently I came across some statistics which shocked me. Your journal, U.S. News and World Report, wrote that 23 million Americans, that is to say one out of every five Americans, does not know how to read and write well enough to cope with the demands of everyday life. What can you say in regards to this? Can it really be that this is possible in such a developed country as the U.S.A.?"

The American at the podium, who spoke fluent Russian, was at a loss to provide an answer. He made a lame joke and passed on to the next subject.

Interestingly enough, the Soviet Union doesn't have a reading problem. Any child who attends a Soviet school learns to read. But millions of children in American schools become reading disabled, and many graduate as functional illiterates. Why? Is it possible that something is wrong with the way we teach children to read?

How do they teach reading in the Soviet Union? They use the analytic/synthetic method -- a method commonly known as intensive phonics. That was the method used in the early 1930s when I went to school in New York City. In those days there was no reading problem.

But later in the 1930s, a new method of teaching was introduced into the schools called look-say, the whole-word method. It was based on the peculiar idea that you can teach children to read English as

if it were Chinese. The result has been an academic disaster of such proportions that it will take generations before its ill effects are eradicated from our society, if ever.

In 1955, Rudolf Flesch exposed the teaching-methods problems in a historic book entitled Why Johnny Can't Read. In it he wrote: "The teaching of reading all over the United States, and in all the textbooks, is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

What was the reaction of the educators to all of this? They denounced Flesch, created a powerful professional organization to counter his influence, and continued to promote their methods in the schools of America. And of course the situation continued to get worse.

In 1965 Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, supposedly to cure the reading problem and other ills. But in fact it made matters worse, for while the educators got \$42 billion for Title One between 1965 and 1984, the teaching methods were not changed. Meanwhile, the SATs began their nose-dive, falling 43 points between 1966 and 1980.

The failure of Title One did not go entirely unnoticed. In 1969 a blue-ribbon Committee on Reading was formed to study the literacy problem. In its report of 1975 the committee had this to say about Title One:

It is not cynical to suggest that the chief beneficiaries of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) have been members of school systems -- both professional and paraprofessional -- for whom new jobs were created. Seven years and as many billion dollars later, the children of the poor have not been "compensated" as clearly as the employees of the school systems through this investment.

The Committee came to the conclusion that the literacy problem could only be solved by bypassing "the existing education macrostructure." What the Committee was telling us, in effect, is that the greatest obstacle to literacy in America is our own education establishment.

The legislation before you calls for a full and complete investigation of teacher training in the United States by a commission made up of non-educators: that is, parents, whose children are the victims of educational malpractice, representatives of business and industry who must employ the functional illiterate, and school board members who must govern the public schools for their communities.

It is obvious that today's organized teachers cannot be trusted to monitor their own performance. They have too high a vested interest in institutionalized malpractice. It justifies the enormous federal investment in public education.

In July 1980, David Broder interviewed Terry Herndon, executive director of the NEA, and asked him why so little was said at the NEA convention about educational quality. Herndon's response was quite astonishing. He said: "We don't have the answers."

Hopefully, the proposed commission will find the answer for Mr. Herndon.

If the government finds it important to protect Americans from toxic waste, consumer fraud, and the possible harm of cigarette smoking, it ought to become equally concerned with protecting American children from the devastating blight of functional illiteracy. Therefore I hope that the proposed commission will be established as a first step in providing that protection.

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD has written six books on education, including The New Illiterates, How to Tutor, How to Start Your Own Private School -- And Why You Need One, Is Public Education Necessary?, and Alpa-Phonics. He is Massachusetts chairman of the Reading Reform Foundation. His articles have appeared in Esquire, Reason, American Education, Vital Speeches, Education Digest, American Legion Magazine, and other publications. Mr. Blumenfeld has taught in both public and private schools and is a member of the board of directors of Heights Academy, South Boston, Massachusetts.