



Why Big City Newspapers Are Dying

The problem is now so severe that the National Endowment for the Arts issued an alarming report, "Reading at Risk," in November 2007, revealing the precipitous decline of literacy in America. According to the report, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. About half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure.



Endowment Chairman Dana Gioia stated: "This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading." The survey found that only a third of high school seniors read at a proficient level. "And proficiency is not a high standard," said Gioia. "We're not asking them to be able to read Proust in the original. We're talking about reading the daily newspaper."

In other words, the continued decline of literacy skills among Americans has had its impact on newspaper reading. True, newspapers must compete with cable television and the Internet for the attention of readers, but no one can deny that the main reason why so many Americans no longer read newspapers is because they are functionally illiterate. Yes, they can look at alluring pictures in glossy magazines and read copy written at a third or fourth grade level, but they can't handle the written word at a high level.

And the newspapers themselves must share some of the blame for this literacy decline. As political liberals they have backed the progressive educators who are responsible for the Dewey whole-word teaching method that has produced low literacy. Their editorials usually support educational reform, but they rarely advocate getting back to systematic phonics, which liberals view as a reactionary throwback to out-dated conservative values.

The *Boston Globe* has been one of the most liberal papers in the country, and its grasp of how children are taught to read in Boston schools is biased in favor of progressive methodology. They simply refuse to believe that our literacy problem is being caused by the educational malpractice rampant in the public schools.

Describing the political position of the *Globe* in 2001, editorial-page editor Renee Loth told the Boston University alumni magazine:

"The *Globe* has a long and proud tradition of being a progressive institution, especially on social issues. We are pro-choice; we're against the death penalty; we're for gay rights. But if people read us carefully, they will find that on a whole series of other issues, we are not knee-jerk. We're for charter schools;



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we're for any number of business-backed tax breaks. We are a lot more nuanced and subtle than that liberal stereotype does justice to."

It should be noted that charter schools are public schools and only get their charters if the approving committee likes the curriculum. I know of one application for a charter school presented by a group of conservative parents who intended to use a traditional curriculum. It was soundly rejected. I don't recall the *Globe* being upset over that rejection.

Yes, the decline of newspaper readership may have much to do with our changing information technology. But literacy is still the most important of all the information technologies the human race has developed. Our civilization has been built on that technology, and students learning English in India and China are quite aware of that.

Our newspapers should have been in the forefront of institutions advocating teaching methods in the schools that produce high literacy. But they fell for the progressive fraud. And so, even though our population is growing, newspaper reading is declining because of an increasingly dumbed-down public. With hundreds of channels now available on cable TV and thousands of blogs on the Internet, who needs newspapers?

Yet, a conservative newspaper like *The Wall Street Journal* is growing and thriving.

The simple fact is, however, that while big city liberal papers sink into history, lots of local community papers are cropping up with lots of local ads and canned articles. And in the Athens of America, the citizenry will still have a newspaper - the generally conservative tabloid *Boston Herald*.

Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld is the author of nine books on education including *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, *The Whole Language/OBE Fraud*, and *The Victims of Dick & Jane and Other Essays*. Of *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, former U.S. Senator Steve Symms of Idaho said: "Every so often a book is written that can change the thinking of a nation. This book is one of them." Mr. Blumenfeld's columns have appeared in such diverse publications as *Reason*, *The New American*, *The Chalcedon Report*, *Insight*, *Education Digest*, *Vital Speeches*, *WorldNetDaily*, and others.



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