

ExWyZee Remedial Reading

BEHIND THE DYSLEXIA CLOSET DOOR

This is an edited version of a memo sent in 2004 to the 21 members of the Cherry Commission, a group charged by Michigan Governor Granholm to recommend ways to double the percentage of college graduates in Michigan. To say the group was Blue Ribbon is understating its collective status. As you will see, if you read it, the memo's purpose was to urge the commission to address the problem of adult illiteracy in the state.

Response to this memo by Lt. Governor Cherry, a politician you might recall, was yes, to be successful the commission must address adult illiteracy. Of course, the commission didn't address it. Maybe that was because the number 20 was a neat number of recommendations to make.

At about that same time, in some speech, CMU's president asserted that it was not the job of a university to hand-hold the ill-prepared graduates of our high schools. I have that speech in a pile around here somewhere. That's not to pick on CMU's past-president in particular. It became apparent that the then-presidents of

UM	Oakland U	Grand Valley State
MSU	Macomb CC	Grand Rapids CC
	Marygrove College	

all members of the commission, didn't think it was their calling either. If they had, they might at least have issued a minority report on the matter.

[See page 4 for a list of commission appointees.](#)

HERE'S THE MEMO TO THE COMMISSION

This is to speak from the perspective of an adult illiterate. While I learned to read on schedule as a child, my brother is illiterate. He and I are Central Michigan University retirees. I was a professor in the mathematics department. He was a janitor in a dormitory food commons. So I have vicariously tasted the humiliation, the emotional agony, and debilitating economic cost of illiteracy.

(1) MICHIGAN'S ILLITERATE ADULTS, A WRITTEN-OFF UNDERCLASS

When I say that little has been done by Official Michigan over the last 50 years about the adult illiteracy problem, some will be inclined to throw this paper aside, and perhaps to mutter that I must be blind -- not to have noticed such things as special-ed programs, the MEAP, schools of choice, charter schools, upgrading of teacher preparation programs and the teacher certification code, and increases in school funding.

But, for you who would read on, those are actions and forces aimed at adolescent illiterates, not at adult ones. Of course, those things are based on the logical proposition that, as with building cars, the way to solve the problem of a flawed product is fix the assembly line, and stop turning out bad ones.

Unfortunately, that's an illogical proposition for turning out good readers. We don't know how to keep from turning out flawed ones. Maybe, in the next 50 years, we will have all children coming to school well-fed, rested, loved, and ready to learn. Maybe we will learn how to reprogram a dyslexic brain.

I might be asked if I have failed to notice our state-blanketing, open-door network of community colleges, where they teach division of fractions, where to put semicolons, where Nova Scotia is -- and reading. (Except for some in the UP, nearly all of us are within a 35-mile drive of a community College.) The next observation addresses that question.

(2) TO ALLEVIATE THE PROBLEM OF ADULT ILLITERACY, IT MUST BE TREATED AS A SYNDROME

Absurd as it sounds at first glance, the fact that the adult illiterate can't read is not the biggest problem that must be dealt with in an effective program to alleviate adult illiteracy. The adult illiterate suffers from a syndrome. I'd like to call it Adult-Illiterate-Dyslexia-Syndrome, but the initials for that designation are already taken, so Adult-Illiterate-Syndrome will do. Three symptoms identify AIS victims:

- (1) They are profoundly ashamed.
- (2) They are in a closet, constantly on guard against discovery.
- (3) They don't read very well.

Nothing we do about adult illiteracy will have significant impact unless all three symptoms of that syndrome are addressed. It would be nice to think (about an adult literacy program) that, if-you-build-it-they-will-come. But that's as much a Field of Dreams as Kevin Costner's movie.

A program is built in Southeast Michigan, and they aren't much coming. Here are some revealing numbers from promotional literature of the Metro Detroit Reads Family Literacy Centers. (NOTE: Data gathered in 2004.)

70,000: The number of reading-impaired in need of help in Macomb County, per Macomb Literacy Partners (Marsha DeVergilio, Director).

600,000: Estimate of reading-impaired in need of help in Wayne County.

135,000: The number of homes and businesses to which a brochure is mailed twice a year with information about the Downriver Literacy Council (Judy Cock, Director).

But only 500+: The number that the literacy evangelists in two of those Southeast centers were able to coax in for free tutoring last year. (The Dominican and Siena Literacy Centers. Marie Schoenlein and Mary Hemmen, Directors). *And more than half of those tutored in the Dominican Center were immigrants, who were reading-impaired only because they had not learned to read English back home.*

If you want to help adult illiterates you'll have to go after them. You'll have to flush them out of their in-plain-sight hideouts. They've been to school, and it didn't work. For most of them, the classroom was not a happy place. Trying to learn to read, or being called on to read, became more painful with each school year from the second grade on.

If it should come to pass that some new therapy will put some paraplegics on their feet, and you advertise a meeting at your school to present the details, you will have a long line of wheelchairs outside the gymnasium when you open the doors. But you won't need a gymnasium to accommodate the crowd for a meeting to inform people about a new remedial-reading clinic for adults. A small classroom will hold those who would come out of hiding for that meeting.

(3) THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN AN ILLITERATE ADULT MIGHT EXCEED THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN AN ENGINEER.

Considering cost-effectiveness and measurable results, spending \$X to create 10,000 engineers yields a nice countable pool of engineers. Spending \$Y to bring 10,000 of the reading impaired to a level where they can read Dr. Seuss to a kid, and fill out a job application form, doesn't yield much of a statistic for an annual report.

But, bring ten thousand up to the Dr. Seuss level, and, while that won't much increase college enrollments, it will have a positive, if not measurable, effect on Michigan's welfare enrollment, prison enrollment, the divorce court load, domestic violence, even suicides.

If that sounds like melodramatic hyperbole to you, you don't know how devastating it is for an AIS victim who has ignored, or has mis-read, some sign on the wall, to be admonished by, "Can't you read?" And you don't know how debilitating it is that someone whose job is running a mower on a grounds crew doesn't even apply for an opening in the air-conditioned university stores department -- because he can't read labels on parcels.

Leaving compassion out of it, and looking at it from a cold economic point of view, enabling an adult illiterate to read Charlotte's Web to a child, and to read the address on a UPS package, might reap greater socio-economic benefit to Michigan than graduating an engineer.

(There are, I've been told, statistical data on how much each unemployed functionally illiterate adult costs the state of Michigan. Perhaps somebody on the commission knows where to look for that figure.)

(4) SO, HOW CAN THE READING IMPAIRED BE BROUGHT OUT OF HIDING, AND ASKED AGAIN TO RISK THE EMOTIONAL ANGUISH OF TRYING TO SUCCEED AT SOMETHING AT WHICH THEY HAVE FAILED SO OFTEN, AND WHICH HAS CAUSED THEM SO MUCH GRIEF?

I'm not being facetious when I suggest that our governor be asked to create an advisory panel of experts to help answer that question. Blue ribbon is not the right color code for this panel. Emotionally black and blue is fitting.

I suggest a panel of reading-impaired adults who are currently making progress in reading improvement programs. Appointing some who have had no reading instruction since elementary school would be good, but they will be difficult to recruit.

The first meeting of such a group should *not* be held in some room with a chalkboard and seats all in a row. The MacMullan Conference Center at Higgins Lake would be good -- with the fireplace fired up.

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Commission appointees

- Ms. Fawzea B. Abusalah, *recent college graduate, Legal Assistant with* Ayad & Associates
- Mr. Lu Battaglieri, President of the Michigan Education Association
- Mr. Richard E. Blouse, Jr., President and CEO of Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Ms. Mary Elizabeth Bunn, Secretary-treasurer of the International Union. UAW
- Mr. Brian D. Cloyd, Director of Corporate & Community Relations at Steelcase Inc.
- Ms. Mary Sue Coleman, President of the University of Michigan
- Ms. Paula D. Cunningham, President of Lansing Community College
- Mr. Dan L. DeGrow, Superintendent of St. Clair County Intermediate School District
- Ms. Deborah I. Dingell, Executive Director of Government and Community Relations at the GM Foundation
- Mr. Steven K. Hamp, President of The Henry Ford
- Mr. David B. Hecker, President of the Michigan Federation of Teachers and School Related Personnel
- Lawrence L. Hildalgo, Jr. Training Director Lansing Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee
- Mr. Kenneth Hill, Executive Director of Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program
- Mr. Jack A. Litzenberg, Program Director and Senior Program Officer at the Mott Foundation
- Mr. Albert L. Lorenzo, President of Macomb Community College
- Mr. Paul E. Massaron, Owner of PEM Consulting
- Mr. Mark A. Murray, President of Grand Valley State University
- Mr. Robert H. Naftaly, Chair of the State Tax Commission
- Mr. Juan R. Olivarez, President of Grand Rapids Community College
- Mr. John W. Porter, Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Mr. Phillip H. Power, Chairman of Hometown Communication
- Ms. Glenda D. Price, President of Marygrove College
- Mr. Gary D. Russi, President of Oakland University
- Ms. Lou Ann K. Simon, Incoming President of Michigan State University
- Ms. Shirley R. Stancato, President of New Detroit
- Mr. Dennis J. Stanek, Superintendent of Delta-Schoolcraft Intermediate School District
- Ms. Kathleen Straus, President of the State Board of Education
- Ms. Gail F. Torreano, President of SBC Michigan
- Ms. Maria J. Vaz, Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Programs at Lawrence Technology University
- Ms. Leola Wilson, Member of the Saginaw Intermediate School District Board of Education