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Phyllis Schlafly

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THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER

Phyllis Schlafly†

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. In reading the statement of purpose of The Federalist Society and noting its principles, I think it is admirable to have a voice speaking out against the arrogance of the judiciary in using its power to impose liberal ideology on the rest of our society. Indeed, the Society's statement of purpose correctly points out the high-handed manner in which courts have used power at the expense of an individual's ability to control his own destiny. Many of those results have been brought about by lawyers, and it is encouraging to see many lawyers who are speaking out on the other side. Court decisions are reported and critiqued, allowing public debate in many of those areas.

There is, however, another instrument of power in our society which I believe is just as influential as the courts. This instrument of power has curtailed individuals' rights, abused authority, and violated our Constitution. It, too, is kept in power by the "system," a solid phalanx of tax-paid lawyers who have built an empire where there is no adversary system at all, no reporting, no public debate, and no media coverage. The lawyers who maintain this barricade are so intimidating that only a handful of cases has ever reached the courts. You do not even study this instrument in law school when you take a course in family law. I therefore appreciate this opportunity to lift a curtain on what I believe is a great problem in our nation today.

The monster in our midst is the public school system. It has failed to perform its prescribed function of teaching children reading, writing, and arithmetic. We do not need to belabor that point. We know that 27,000,000 people have been through the public schools in the last twenty years and cannot read.¹ We know that

† President of the Eagle Forum. The author is also a lawyer, author, syndicated columnist, radio commentator, and was appointed by President Reagan to be a member of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution (1985-1991). She has regularly testified before Congress and state legislatures about topics ranging from education, child care, and parental leave to international treaties and nuclear weaponry. The author is a graduate of Washington University, Washington University Law School, and Harvard University.

¹ Lauro F. Cavazos, *Building Bridges for At-Risk Children* PRINCIPAL MAG. (1989).

even Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a speech recently that only 6% of high school seniors can read a newspaper editorial, write a two-page essay, and complete a two-step math problem.² That means 94% of high school seniors cannot—evidence that we are not only talking about poor and minority children. We are talking about average children at average schools. This education problem has nothing to do with the spending of money. The abuses of power that I will discuss occur even more often in the wealthier schools than in the poorer schools.

Despite this failure of the school system to function as it was intended, an empire has been erected in which raw power is used to conduct daily and extensive violations of the First Amendment religious rights of children by teaching them to rely on a pseudo-god, instead of the God they have been taught to worship in the home. By pseudo-god, I mean such creatures of the self-esteem courses as Duso the Dolphin and Pumsy the Dragon.³ Children are taught the power of witches, horoscopes, and astrology. They are taught that they must accept a code of ethics (in total violation of the code of ethics they have been taught in the home) which denies authority and absolute values and teaches the child that he or she alone can decide whether illicit drugs and premarital sex are okay. Children are taught that they can make such decisions by themselves without consulting their parents, the law, or other authority.

These constitutional violations in the public schools include daily violations of the Fifth Amendment ban against self-incrimination.⁴ Minor children are forced to disclose all sorts of things that we would not allow the police department to force arrested suspects to disclose. Children are required to reveal incriminating information about themselves and their families. They are forced to submit to group psychotherapy in the public school classroom, conducted by unlicensed psychologists, in the form of teachers who have attended a half-day workshop in how to conduct counseling in the classroom. Children in the classroom are forced to read materials which the parents consider pornographic, profane, immoral, and anti-religious. The American people would never stand for any government bureau or any court forcing adults to submit to these types of violations, but these violations are committed on minor children in the public school classroom every day. You never hear of these

² Speech given at conference sponsored by the Gates Foundation in Denver, Colorado (Sept. 20-23, 1989) in *EDUCATION REP.*, Dec. 1989, at 3.

³ DUSO the dolphin and Pumsy the dragon are fictional characters in self-awareness and self-esteem building curricula designed for use with children.

⁴ U.S. CONST. amend. V.

violations because the media have chosen not to make this a national issue.

Let me give you a couple of concrete examples. They come from every state in the union, every part of the country. A typical example of the privacy-invading questionnaires children are required to complete can be seen in the questionnaire that has been given to every public school child in the State of Minnesota.⁵ It is a 189-question, one-hour survey. Let me take you through some of its most objectionable features. First, the survey asks the following privacy-invading questions: Are you a religious person? How often do you attend church? How important is church in your lives? Are your parents divorced? Were they ever married? Do you live in a home with people to whom you are not related? Next, the survey asks questions which alienate the child from his parents: Would you like to see a doctor, nurse or counselor without your parents knowing about it? Then it asks several depressing questions: Have you ever felt so sad, discouraged, and hopeless and had so many problems that you wonder if anything is worthwhile? Do you worry about dying soon, being hit by a nuclear bomb, your parents dying, your parents divorcing? Are you worried about losing your mind or memory or having a nervous breakdown? How many times have you tried to kill yourself? There are many questions about suicide. The survey continues, asking the following incriminating questions on drugs: How often do you use cigarettes, beer, wine, hard liquor, marijuana, crack, cocaine? How old were you when you started? Then, there are questions which ask the children to "snitch" on their parents: Has alcohol or drugs by a family member caused any member of your family health, job, or legal problems? The same question is asked for a whole list of drugs. Finally, the survey asks questions on explicit sex: How old were you the first time you had sexual intercourse? What kind of birth control do you use and how often? It even asks detailed questions to test the threshold of homosexual attraction.

Schools have no business asking children such questions. A federal law prohibits this kind of interrogation without prior written parental consent, but the Department of Education will not enforce it.⁶ The lawyers form a solid phalanx to defend the public schools' right to do whatever they want with the child.

Now, let's talk about psychological counseling and psychotherapy in the classroom. In the early elementary grades, these sessions are usually called the stress classes. They say that these kindergartners, first, and second graders have so much stress—no doubt

⁵ MINN. DEP'T OF EDUC., MINNESOTA STUDENT SURVEY (1989).

⁶ General Education Provisions Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1232h(b) (1989).

caused by their parents. In the upper grades, the psychological curricula are called self-esteem courses. The trend today is to teach self-esteem instead of reading, writing, and arithmetic. This teaching includes many pseudo-religious courses. If you browse through the New Age section of your local bookstore, you will discover what these practices are, and then you will find that many of them are used in the classroom. These practices include progressive relaxation, meditation, guided imagery, visualization, and centering. All of these exercises are commonly associated with the New Age religion. These exercises might ask you to pretend you are soaring on a fluffy, white cloud; pretend you are breathing through imaginary holes in your feet; or imagine a candle floating in a dark room. Some of these practices are a form of self-hypnosis. All of them are objectionable. The counseling is done right in the classroom. We do not object to one-on-one counseling of a disturbed child by a professional. That is not what we are talking about. We do object to classroom courses in which all the children are given psychological treatment or therapy by people who do not have the slightest idea of what they are doing and are not professionally trained to provide such treatment.

Only one type of these psychological courses has made it into the national media—the courses on death and dying. A real breakthrough in the national media occurred when ABC television aired a segment following a landmark article in *The Atlantic Monthly*.⁷ The death and dying courses are very morbid and gruesome. The children are taken on trips to funeral parlors where they touch the dead bodies. They are taken into the embalming labs and into the crematorium. Many children have found this very traumatic. Several students have committed suicide after taking these death and dying courses.⁸

What is the reaction of the schools when parents say they do not like this? That is, when parents complain, “We send our children to school to learn to read and write and add and subtract. We do not want them worked on like guinea pigs.” Well, I will tell you how the majority of schools react. They say,

we have got your child and we are going to do whatever we want with your child, and your only option is to take your child out and put him in another school. And if you create any trouble about this, we will brand you as right-wing, fundamentalist, extremist, book-burning censors. We will leak ugly articles about you to the

⁷ Fergus M. Bordewich, *Mortal Fears: Courses in “Death Education” Get Mixed Reviews*, *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, Feb. 1988, at 30.

⁸ CHILD ABUSE IN THE CLASSROOM 71, 121, 262, 266, 319 (Phyllis Schlafly ed., 1984).

press. We will treat your child badly and make him sit in the hall if you do not want him to take one of these classes.

What is the parent to do? The school is defended by a whole battery of tax-paid lawyers who have crafted school law that allows the school do whatever it wants with the child, leaving the parent with little recourse.

I hope that there will be some of you who will want to take up the battle and be a champion for the constitutional and legal rights of children in the public school classroom. They have a right to be in the classroom without having their religion, their values, and their parents put down by courses and various exercises. They have a right to be there without being made to disclose what is going on inside their family unit. Just as we have established that the atheist has a right to silence everybody else in the classroom from saying a prayer, it seems to me that the rest of the children should have a right to be in the classroom and not have their legal and constitutional rights abused by this type of behavior.