

# Our Failing Students Are Crippled for Life

Thirty-odd years ago, I taught adult basic education two nights a week in a minimum-security prison in Hazelwood, North Carolina.

The men in my classes had committed a variety of crimes. The majority were incarcerated for drug-related felonies, mostly possession and dealing. One major dealer from Charlotte was rumored to have killed a rival, while another inmate had murdered his wife in a lover's quarrel. Still another had once lived across the street from me and burglarized various houses in the neighborhood, though as he told me, "I never hit your place, you know." One young man was behind bars for child molestation but, given his limited intelligence, would probably have fared better in a psychiatric unit.

The great majority of these prisoners were white, reflecting the demographics of Western North Carolina. Some were in their late teens, a few in their 60s. Some had grown up on farms, some in cities. Some were serious about learning, while others were clearly in the classroom to escape the dormitory for two hours. Some spoke lovingly of their parents, spouses, children, or girlfriends. Others were bitter, including one old man who swore to several people in class that he was going home to kill his wife when he was released. The police shot him dead in a chicken coop on his property when he tried to do that very thing.

Despite these differences, these men all shared one thing in common: they were uneducated.

During the two years I taught, there were always a couple of men in my class who were illiterate, which stunned me. From my employer, I requested and received a helper who tutored these

students. Many of the other men had the reading, writing, and math skills of a third-grader. "I just couldn't keep up after that," one of them told me.

The reasons for their failure in school were obvious. They came from families and even a culture that placed little value on education, and likely many of the teachers and administrators who had overseen their learning had given up on them.

Enough of the past. Let's jump to the present.

On Feb. 1, the *Washington Examiner* [reported](#) that 77 percent of the students in a Baltimore high school were reading at elementary levels. Of the 628 students tested, 484 were in this group, including 159 who were only reading at a kindergarten or first-grade level.

This same article tells us that only 37 percent of high school seniors nationwide might be considered proficient readers.

We can point to a number of possible causes for these gloomy statistics: COVID-19 with its devastating impact on attendance and learning, the extraneous teaching of such non-academic subjects as gender and critical race theory, and the general failure of our schools to teach literacy. Some parents are also to blame—particularly for their failure to pay attention to their children's educational progress—as are some students themselves, who make little effort as they are passed from grade to grade knowing all the while that they are participating in a sham.

And the effects? Our public schools are producing an army of semi-literate citizens who will be hard-pressed to find decent jobs or enter college, much less enjoy an informed and reflective life.

If our leaders were serious about racial equality and equal

opportunity in America, our schools would teach all our children to read, to write, and to calculate. These old-fashioned 3Rs—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—remain foundational for any child's education. Anyone possessing those three skills can tackle any subject on the planet—calculus, the history of India, biology, the law. But a kid from Baltimore or any other place who can't read the news, decipher a bill, write a resume, or do long division faces a bleak future.

And so does our country.

Here, by the way, is a related story. Some 200 hundred bodies were awaiting autopsies, the *Baltimore Banner* [reported](#) on Feb. 9, and were being stored in a Baltimore parking garage temporarily serving as a morgue. The reason for this overflow is that recent staff shortages have prevented hospitals from keeping up with autopsies, which are required in cases of murders and drug overdoses, both of which are on the rise, according to the *Banner*. So now the morbid picture comes a little clearer—many of these poor souls in the makeshift morgue had died from gunshot wounds and drug overdoses.

It's probably fair to say that some of them had also died from a lack of education.

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