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No secret how to improve U.S. schools

By D.L. Cuddy

SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Last week the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments concerning a case in which a high school student sought permission for a Bible club. Believing in the biblical teaching that "where two or three are gathered together in my (Jesus') name, there I am in the midst of them," the Christian students wanted to gather after school for fellowship.

School officials, however, felt formal allowance of a Bible club could appear as if the school might support the moral principles of the club in violation of the legal principle of separation of church and state. Yet this calls attention to the hypocrisy of many school systems across the country that offer comprehensive sex education without a moral basis, but which for some reason do not fear that this might appear as if the schools support non-moral sexual activity.

This is but one example of what is wrong with American education today. Ironically, the same week as the Supreme Court heard the Bible club case, U.S. Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos announced that the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress test results showed students still doing poorly in reading and writing.

Is this any wonder? It shouldn't be. Every time there is a conference on how to solve our educational problems, most of the participants seem to be the very people who have been in leadership positions while education has been going downhill over the

past 25 years. Why aren't these the last people to whom we should listen regarding how to improve our schools?

A quarter of a century ago, our schools were fairly good, but then "progressive education change agents" told us we needed to experiment on ways to improve learning. Thus we got such things as the disastrous "new math" and test scores began to decline. These

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educators next developed "competency tests" for high school graduation requirements, but these tests usually comprised questions at only about the seventh-grade level. This sent the wrong message to students, who then saw that to graduate from the 12th grade, all they had to learn was seventh-grade material. And today, schools are still sending the wrong signal, because more than half of the high schools in this nation have no policy requiring homework.

Actually, we already know how to provide a good education for our youth.

Since 1911, there have been more than 125 studies comparing phonics to the "look-say" method of read-

ing instruction, and none of the studies has shown "look-say" to be superior. Yet about 85 percent of the schools in the United States do not use an intensive phonics approach when teaching reading. Likewise, there has been remarkable success in schools that have introduced what's called the Saxon method of teaching fundamental math skills and concepts through long-term practice, but it is not even allowed in a number of states.

In addition to these recommendations in the areas of reading and math, I would suggest that an inexpensive way to improve education would be for school systems simply to request that their teachers voluntarily submit successful methods and activities they have used. These suggestions then could be compiled by subject matter or grade level and shared with all the teachers in the system.

My own research demonstrated that not only might this improve teaching, but discipline problems might be reduced as well. This is because when students are introduced to a teaching method or activity previously unfamiliar to them, they tend to become less bored and more interested in learning.

Finally, because we already know what works in education, I would suggest that Congress should investigate why the principles and practices of sound pedagogy are not being used in American schools today.

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