

# The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.  
"Without vision, the people perish."

## The Great American Math Disaster

When *Newsweek* begins to sound like the *Blumenfeld Education Letter* when describing the failures of public education, then we can assume that the most ardent defenders of the public schools among our businessmen and politicians and journalists are well aware of the seemingly insoluble problems the system faces. However, when it comes to solutions, that's where we differ quite radically. We are always amazed at how readily and uncritically the powers that be accept the solutions offered by the educators. Considering how much emphasis the educators are placing on critical thinking these days, it's amazing how little of it is being exercised by the many intelligent people who are in a position to judge what the educators are doing. And so, it is left to us to do the critical thinking. What follows, then, is the *Newsweek* report of June 17, 1991, interspersed with our critical comments:

How bad are eighth graders' math skills? So bad that half are scoring just above the proficiency level expected of fifth-grade students. Even the best students did miserably; at the top-scoring schools, the average was well below grade level. Hardly any students have the background to go beyond simple

computation; most of these kids can add but they have serious trouble thinking through simple problems. These grim statistics, released in June in the first large-scale state-by-state study of math achievement, prompted Education Secretary Lamar Alexander to declare a math emergency in the nation's schools. "None of the states are cutting it," he said. "This is an alarm bell that should ring all night throughout this country."

What's really frightening about these results is that the alarm has been ringing since the 1983 publication of "A Nation at Risk," the federally sponsored study that highlighted vast problems in the public schools. Yet despite years of talk about reform — and genuine efforts at change in a few places — American students are still not making the grade and remain behind their counterparts in other industrialized nations.

It's refreshing to hear our new Secretary of Education declare a "math emergency." And what's the cause of this dismal failure on the part of our students? Read on.

Most mainstream educators already agree that American math instruction needs a drastic overhaul, with more emphasis on group problem-solving and creative thinking rather than repetitive drills. But local schools continue to resist these prescriptions. "It's like we have a cure for polio, but we're not giving the inoculation," said Bill Honig, California's super-

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