

We have devoted considerable space in the recent past to discussions of "political correctness" and the revision of history. This statement by Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, appeared as an advertisement in The New Republic explaining the position of that organization, especially in light of a public opinion poll commissioned by the New York State United Teachers.

DON'T STOP TEACHING THE COMMON HERITAGE

By Albert Shanker

Last year, around Thanksgiving, a disturbing letter appeared in the New York Times. A father reported that, in preparation for celebrating an "international" Thanksgiving, each child in his son's pre-kindergarten class was told to select a flag identifying his national origin. The letter writer's little boy had to decide whether he wanted a flag representing his English, Scottish, Irish, German or Jewish ancestry. The American flag was not one of the choices until some parents complained — too late for this man's kid to choose it.

But the man wasn't writing about his son's disappointment. What bothered him was the lesson all of this was teaching the kids about their identity: "On one of this country's truly national holidays, they are encouraged to think of themselves as anything but American... What is being challenged here is the whole idea that there is an America — that people of different races, creeds and national origins can be united as one nation."

Is the belief in a common heritage disappearing in the U.S.? Do people in various ethnic groups think public schools should forget about fostering pride in American values and achievements and, instead, teach kids only about the values and achievements of their own groups? That's the message this father got, and it's the one you'd get if you listened to the comments of leaders from various ethnic groups — and to some well-intentioned educators, like Thomas Sobol, New York State's commissioner of education. These people think they're being responsive to the wishes of their constituents. Now, the results of a public opinion poll commissioned by the New York State United Teachers tell us that scrapping the common heritage in favor of separate histories of separate groups isn't what ordinary citizens want at all.

Three-quarters of the New York staters who responded to the NYSUT poll considered teaching "the common heritage and values that we share as Americans" to be "very important." And when you break down responses by ethnic groups, it turns out that many more African-Americans and Hispanics believe it's "very important" to teach the common heritage than Whites. The numbers are 70 percent of Whites and a whopping 89 percent of African-

Americans and 88 percent of Hispanics.

But respondents to the NYSUT poll were not talking about going back to the old way of teaching history, when we ignored the contributions of minority ethnic and racial groups to American history and society. Eight-nine percent believed that public schools should teach "both the traditional events of American history and the contributions and experiences of America's ethnic and racial populations." And there was strong agreement across groups on this point: 88 percent of the Whites, 91 percent of the African-Americans and 92 percent of the Hispanics polled believed that both should be taught.

What about the self-esteem factor? Would students who are achieving poorly do better if they were taught about their ethnic heritage? Most respondents to the NYSUT poll did not believe this was the primary cause for poor student achievement. Only 6 percent overall (and 12 percent of African-Americans) put failure to teach students about their ethnic heritage at the top of the list. The most-cited reason was crime and drugs in the neighborhood (41 percent), followed by neighborhood poverty (24 percent). Even inadequate school funding came above "not knowing enough about their heritage" as the chief cause for poor achievement. Furthermore, the majority of people did not believe that schools had the primary responsibility for building ethnic and racial pride in kids: 92 percent overall — including 88 percent of African-Americans and 85 percent of Hispanics — said that was the job of the family.

Should we be surprised that African-Americans and Hispanics believe, even more than Whites, that children should learn about America's common heritage in public school? Or that a big majority still believes it is the family's responsibility to instill ethnic and racial pride in children? These responses may be surprising in the light of things we hear from some community leaders, but they are consistent with our past practices and beliefs.

Members of minority groups in this country have always believed, correctly, that their children's path to success lay in learning the common culture and that the public schools were responsible for teaching that

culture. It was the job of families and churches to make sure kids understood and valued their ethnic and racial heritage.

This is not merely an American pattern. A study of immigrant children in French elementary schools, for instance, shows that 80 percent rejected the special classes offered in their own languages, largely because they did not wish to be stigmatized or placed at a disadvantage by having an education different from other French children. And they were right. Foreign-born children who got a French education from the beginning achieved at slightly higher levels than French children from the same socio-economic groups.

We hear a lot of separatist rhetoric these days. The NYSUT study offers heartening evidence that those who supposedly speak for a community are not always the voice of the people. We should pay attention. It would be tragic to intensify divisions in our society with separatist curriculums when most people still want children to learn about our common heritage. ■

[For more information about the poll, contact the New York State United Teachers at 159 Wolf Road, Box 15-008, Albany, NY 12212-5008.]