

CNN LIVE AT DAYBREAK

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Well, when it comes to writing, a lot of Americans don't have the right stuff, and they are paying dearly for it. The National Commission on Writing is out with a new report on state employees. Get this. It says 70 percent of professional state employees have adequate writing skills, but the same is true for only 33 percent of clerical and support staff. And what's the cost for remedial writing training? A whopping \$220 million a year, about \$425 per employee.

Joining us now, former Senator Bob Kerrey, chairman of the National Commission on Writing.

Senator, thanks for waking up with us.

We appreciate it.

BOB KERREY, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON WRITING:
You're welcome.

WALLACE: Well, many of us, when we heard this, were outraged. Nearly a quarter of a billion dollars spent on remedial writing.

How big of a problem do we have on our hands?

KERREY: Well, actually, that quarter of a billion is just the tip of the iceberg at the government level. I mean the survey that we did was just of state employees, not of health or education employees. That's another \$250 million. And then state and the local employees are about four times that. So it's a much bigger number, all government -- state and local government employees.

You know, the even worse news is that last year we surveyed the Business Roundtable and we found the same thing in the private sector.

What's happened, we think, is that just within the last 10 years or so, the demand for writing skills has gone up sharply and our schools simply have not been able to respond.

There's some good news. The commission found some awfully good successes.

The California Writing Project, for example, actually works. It leverages private money, it leverages local money. It's working in many, many school districts. But it takes time. It takes time to get the job done and right now I would guess taxpayers are spending, you know, a couple billion dollars a year. And that's just direct costs, let alone the indirect costs of clerical people or even professional people making mistakes because they simply can't write well and as a consequence, all of a sudden we've found ourselves frustrated by bureaucracy, discover that it costs an awful lot more to correct a mistake than when you do it wrong the first time.

WALLACE: And, Senator, it's interesting, in this age of e-mail, it appears writing inadequacies are becoming more and more apparent. In that survey you're talking about a response on why we're seeing such bad writing, someone saying: "The sender is composing on the spot." We're talking about e-mail. "You might do a spell check, but you can't do a 'thought check.'" It's like blurting out something without thinking it through."

So in the age of e-mail, are we not stopping long enough to think before we write?

KERREY: Well, I'm not sure the technology, actually, has produced the deterioration of writing. We didn't have -- we have not made that conclusion that e-mail has. In fact, in some ways, e-mail at least encourages young people to compose their ideas into words. At least they're doing their composition. They may be doing it incorrectly, their sentence structure may not be right, it may not be terribly compelling once you try to put it down into either a government document or a letter or some business document, as well.

The bottom line here is that in both the private sector and the public sector, if you're trying to get a job and you're trying to hold a job, you'd better learn to write. And if our schools don't allow the time for our teachers to be able to prepare our young people, if our parents don't put as much effort into writing as they do into reading -- and both skills are very much compatible, one produces the other -- you know, your young son and daughter simply are going to find themselves in the workplace, either in the government or the private sector, unable either to get the job they want or to retain it.

WALLACE: A bit of a wake up call for all of us.

Former Senator Bob Kerrey, chairman of the National Commission on Writing.

Thanks for joining us today.

We appreciate it.

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