



The Phyllis Schlafly Report

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Phonics vs. Whole Language

The scandal of widespread illiteracy has finally become a topic of general discussion and debate, from local newspapers to Dan Rather on the CBS Evening News. Americans are at last being told the tragic fact that the public schools are failing to teach children how to read. Our largest and trendiest state forced the facts of illiteracy into the national news stream. California came in last in national fourth-grade reading tests, set up a state task force to find out why, held legislative hearings, discovered that the state's Whole Language method is a disaster, and earmarked \$100 million for new textbooks and teacher training to switch the schools back to phonics.

In order to receive their share of the money, California schools will now have to give students "systematic explicit phonics instruction, with phonemic awareness, sound-symbol relationships, and decoding." Governor Pete Wilson is even requiring that school districts spend their federal Goals 2000 money on reading instruction. Wilson's spokesman, Sean Walsh, was blunt. "Whole Language was an utter failure. Our curriculum taught to kindergarten to third-graders, quite frankly, stinks."

Whole Language teaches children to guess at words by looking at the pictures on the page, to memorize a few dozen frequently used words, to skip over words they don't know, to substitute words that seem to fit, and to predict the words they think will come next. The child who is taught those bad habits, instead of how to sound out the syllables, will never be able to read big words or become a good reader.

Many schools give high grades and happy report cards to children who are good at guessing and memorizing words, so parents don't realize that their children are being taught to guess instead of to read. Self-esteem is a higher priority than literacy.

A federal agency called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) publishes what is called the Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States.

Its recently released report on the 1994 test given to 140,000 students in grades 4, 8 and 12 in public and private schools proves that schoolchildren's reading skills are not only bad, but are getting worse. Comparing 1992 and 1994, the NAEP results show a significant *decline* in the percentage of students scoring at or above the "proficient level" and at or above the "basic level," and a significant *increase* in the percentage of pupils performing below the "basic level." The NAEP tests also show a lack of any positive results from the expensive federal Title I program for the disadvantaged.

How did it happen that the entire public school system abandoned phonics and substituted a guessing system? It's rather easy to date and track the Whole Language system from its official adoption by the state of California in 1987, because California is a model for other states that want to be "progressive."

But Whole Language was not a new idea in 1987; it was just a new name for the system that was already in widespread use called "whole word" or "look-and-say." The mystery as to how that stupid system swept the country, starting in the late 1930s, was revealed in a report aired the first week of June on National Public Radio.

"Look-and-say" came to dominate the schools as a result of a sophisticated marketing plan carried out by Scott Foresman, the publishers of the "Dick and Jane" series of elementary school readers. Scott Foresman sent slick salesmen to every school district to demonstrate how easily children could be taught to "read" the inane "See Dick run" stories that had color illustrations of Dick, Jane and Spot (the dog) doing whatever the one-syllable words described. By the 1950s, the Dick and Jane readers were, as *Newsweek* now tells us, "ubiquitous." In 1955, Rudolf Flesch's landmark book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, fully exposed the fact that this system is a cheat on everyone.

The typical first-grader already knows the meaning

of thousands of big words, such as hamburger, basketball, birthday, toothbrush, and even hippopotamus and Philadelphia. But the child will not be able to read those words unless he is taught the skill of sounding out the syllables. That's what we call phonics.

It is encouraging to see that California is making a massive attempt to abandon the failed Whole Language system and switch to the proven method of phonics. But changing the educational system today will be like trying to change the course of an aircraft carrier with a rowboat.

Parents who want to make sure that their children are not handicapped by the dumbed-down methods used in most public schools today should assume the task of teaching their own children how to read. It's easy to do if you use intensive, systematic phonics. I did it with my six children, and I urge all parents to do likewise with my wonderful system called *First Reader*.

An Educator Discovers Phonics

Those who are trying to get the schools to teach phonics in the first grade instead of Whole Language should use as their major tool the 1996 book by Bill Honig called *Teaching Our Children to Read*. Honig was State Superintendent of Public Instruction for California, 1983-1993, where he presided over a school system that exemplified all the failures and abuses we've been complaining about for years. He is no hero to conservatives or to parents, but he has great credibility among educators.

When he left office two years ago, Honig sincerely set about to find out why public schoolchildren are not learning how to read. He started from the reasonable assumption that "the first and foremost job of elementary school is to teach children to read." His book is just a straightforward explanation, based on voluminous research and empirical evidence, of how children can and should be taught to read.

The most important point Honig makes, repeated at least a dozen times, is that a child absolutely must be "reading beginning books by mid-first grade." He emphasizes that those who miss out in the early first grade need "organized intervention" immediately, because otherwise they "almost never recover."

Reading success depends on the child developing the ability to pick out the smallest "sound chunks" that make up words. Honig says that "the amount of time a student is engaged in phonics instruction is highly predictive of subsequent reading achievement."

A Great Debate has been going on for years between the advocates of phonics (*i.e.*, teaching the child to sound out the syllables of the English language and put them together like building blocks) and the advocates of Whole Language (*i.e.*, teaching the child to guess at the words by looking at the pictures and to

substitute words that fit the context of the story).

Honig exposes the Whole Language myth that the child will learn "naturally," without explicit instruction in skills, in the same way that a child learns to talk. He says this false belief has had the "disastrous" result that 30% to 40% of urban children can't read at all and more than 50% can't read at their grade level. He explains that "bad habits of guessing" make learning to read much more difficult, and these bad habits cannot be remedied by a sporadic, unsystematic use of phonics. He says that "beginning readers who rely too heavily on contextual clues, such as pictures or the connection of other words in the passage, are distracted from looking at the letters in a word and connecting those letter patterns to words in their minds." He reminds us that exposure to good literature "only works if the student actually reads the words correctly — making mistakes doesn't help."

Honig argues for teaching children to write and to spell accurately in the first grade, too. "Inventive spelling" shouldn't be allowed past mid-first grade; children's misspellings should be corrected so erroneous patterns are not reinforced.

How widespread are wrong teaching methods in public schools today? Honig says that "very few instructional programs currently in use provide children with materials designed specifically to connect with systematic and sequenced skills development. In some cases, state, county, district, or university leaders are overtly or subtly antagonistic to the skills components and discourage phonics teaching."

This isn't a book for parents. Honig obviously thinks that parents have no direct role in the mechanics of teaching children to read because that's the job for the public school. Besides, most parents won't be able to cope with his endless educator jargon: phonological awareness and processing, phonemic segmentation, explicit skill development strand, word-attack skills, alphabetic principle, orthographic phase, syntactic awareness, and metacognitive and strategic assistance.

But this highfalutin way of talking about phonics is just right for teachers, administrators and policymakers. It's a road map to get them back on the track of teaching children how to read, which should be the schools' number-one mission.

The Sickness of Illiteracy

"Our health care system requires that patients be able to read." That was the sensational revelation in the December 1995 *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*. It reported on the first study ever made to test literacy using words combined with numbers that are in common use in health care. It was a cross-sectional research project conducted at two

urban hospitals, one in Georgia, the other in California.

This new health literacy study specifically measured the ability of patients to read and understand medical instructions and health care information according to a test called TOFHLA (Test of Functional Health Literacy in Adults) and discovered that 33 percent of patients did not understand instructions for common procedures written at the fourth grade level. This health literacy study measured the ability of patients to perform such tasks as reading labels on prescription bottles, instructions about how often to take medication, notices about when is the next doctor's appointment, informed consent forms, instructions about diagnostic tests, and how to complete insurance forms.

The depressing conclusion is that a high percentage of patients simply can't read well enough to function in our health care system. People with inadequate literacy skills are unable to read a thermometer, write down instructions by telephone, or read common medical terms such as "orally," "teaspoon," and "hours." They can't access useful messages from newspaper and magazine articles, educational materials, posters in supermarkets, or billboards about the importance of screening procedures or flu shots.

Health care standards require hospitals to provide patients with *understandable* health instructions, but do not require that the instructions be *understood*. Hospitals assume they are complying if they give patients a readable document, but a written instruction assumes that the patients can read. Patients who can't read informed consent forms present doctors and hospitals with what the researchers call "a troubling ethical issue." Even if an effort is made to simplify the forms to the sixth grade level, that still will not reach the many who are functionally illiterate. (The massive National Adult Literacy Survey made by the U.S. government in 1993 concluded that 40 to 44 million adults are functionally illiterate and that another 50 million are only marginally literate.)

Other new and useful information was discovered by this health literacy survey. Illiteracy can't be predicted by appearance or years of schooling. This means that illiteracy is not just a problem for minority dropouts or recent immigrants, but is a handicap suffered by all races and classes of people who have no visible signs of disability and have spent many years in school.

Many illiterates do not realize that they have a problem. They are like myopic children who don't know that they are simply not seeing details that others see.

Ronald Reagan tells in his autobiography how, as a young boy riding in the back seat of an automobile, he picked up someone else's glasses and tried them on. Suddenly he was able to see the leaves on the trees and other landscape details for the first time. Until that

moment of revelation, he hadn't known that other children had been seeing so many things that he did not see. The predicament of illiterates is similar. Never having been able to communicate with the printed word, they have no comprehension of the vast world from which they are excluded.

Even more prevalent is the pervasive problem of shame. People with limited literacy skills try to hide their inability to read. The large majority of illiterates describe themselves as reading and writing "well" or "very well." The health literacy study shows that, among patients with low literacy skills, 67.2 percent have never told their spouse, 53.4 percent have never told their own children, and 19 percent have never told anyone at all.

Patients' noncompliance with their medical instructions has been generally assumed by physicians and hospitals to be caused by poor motivation or different personal values. This study calls for a reevaluation of patients who have been labelled "uncooperative"; it is more likely that doctors and hospital personnel, to whom reading is as natural as breathing, never imagined that the patients just couldn't read their instructions.

The *JAMA* article recognizes that illiteracy is not a disease and its solution cannot be medicalized. Since doctors and hospitals can't provide the solution, and the schools have obviously failed in the task, parents will have to take on the responsibility of teaching their children how to read.

Whatever Happened to Competition?

When it comes to the Olympic Games, everyone seems to understand that competition produces the winners and the record-breakers. It's unlikely that the athletes could reach such heights of achievement and endurance if they were not competing against other athletes who are closely matched in skills and putting forth their very best.

Some people, however, are at war against the whole concept of competition. They think it is undemocratic, unfair, and elitist. It's a sign of the times that, in Cecil County, Maryland, basketball is now played by some very unusual rules. If one basketball team is ten points ahead of the other, additional baskets don't count until the underdog team catches up. No record is kept of who scores how many baskets, so no player can ever be recognized as the star of the team.

This system should be called Outcome-Based Basketball because it's just like the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) that has spread through our public schools like a contagious disease. OBE is sometimes called Performance-Based Education.

"**Self-esteem**" is OBE's mantra. Since the lack of self-esteem is postulated to be the cause of all social

ills (crime, illegal drugs, teenage pregnancies, AIDS, and low SAT scores), OBE's primary goal is to inculcate self-esteem. There is no evidence that lack of self-esteem causes those problems, nor is there any evidence that having self-esteem causes students to score better in academic subjects. At best, teaching self-esteem is a waste of precious classroom time and, at worst, it's teaching the wrong lesson that it's okay to feel good about doing poorly in school.

Self-esteem should be the reward that comes from achievement and hard work. It should be earned. But lack of evidence doesn't slow down the self-esteem peddlers because this mantra advances their goal of eliminating all competition from the school experience.

Outcome-Based Education has been properly labeled a dumbing-down of public school education — and the most scandalous of all the dumbing down is the failure to teach children to read in the first grade. But OBE is even worse than failing to teach essential skills such as reading and reducing the amount of knowledge covered.

The combination of OBE and self-esteem eliminates competition as a learning mechanism. This destroys the students' incentive to be the best they can be, and it destroys the school's accountability because parents have no way to measure what their children are doing.

In an OBE school, the traditional A, B, C, D and F are replaced by letters that are meaningless in terms of specific academic achievement, such as S for Satisfactory (sometimes it just means Sometimes) or G for Growth. William Glasser's 1969 book *Schools Without Failure* led the charge against traditional grades. Glasser also argued that giving homework is unfair and elitist because A and B students usually do their homework, whereas poor students don't, thus widening the gap between those who succeed and those who fail in school. He even opposed objective tests because they require students to give correct answers, in contrast to tests that ask questions for which there are no right answers.

The anti-competition movement is galloping across America. Schools are getting rid of their honor roll, honors courses, class rankings, academic prizes, and even valedictorians. Spelling bees are out. If fact, even correct spelling is out; it's replaced by inventive spelling (so students can spell words any way they want).

Ability grouping, or tracking, is forbidden as elitist, undemocratic, or even racist. Pity the poor teacher who has to present a single course of study to eighth graders whose reading ability ranges from the second to the twelfth grades. This problem is getting worse with the mainstreaming of the learning disabled.

OBE does not allow any student to progress faster or farther than the slowest child in the class. This system conceals the fact that some children aren't

learning much of anything. What is the teacher to do with the faster learners after they complete the assigned material? They are required to do peer tutoring (trying to tutor the slower pupils) or "horizontal enrichment." The former is a frustration for all students, and the latter is just busywork.

Cooperative Learning, in which students receive a group grade, is another means of concealing who does the assignment accurately and who goofs off. The brighter students soon learn that their effort is not rewarded, and the slower students learn that there's no reason to try because someone will give them the answers.

The testing system has been corrupted. Not only do all students score "above average" (a marvel of statistical fakery), but many tests are peppered with questions that ask for non-objective responses about feelings, attitudes or predictions, or which have a built-in bias toward Political Correctness. The response to the dramatic decline in SAT scores over the last two decades has resulted, not in toughening the curriculum, but in raising every student's score 100 points, so now students get perfect scores even if they have some wrong answers. This is one more way of concealing the distinction between average and above-average students.

Competition needs to be restored if schools are to prepare students for life. Children should learn early that life is competition, and the rewards go to those who work hard, persevere and achieve.

Phyllis Schlafly, the author of *First Reader*, has her B.A. from Washington University, her M.A. from Harvard University, her J.D. from Washington University Law School, and an honorary LL.D. from Niagara University. Mrs. Schlafly taught her six children to read before they entered school, and all had outstanding academic careers. Her best-selling book, *Child Abuse in the Classroom*, was called "required reading for every parent" by Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell. Her nationally syndicated daily radio commentaries and Saturday call-in radio programs are devoted primarily to education topics.

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