



The Phyllis Schlafly Report



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How And Why I Taught My Children To Read

Testimony of Phyllis Schlafly
To The House Education And Labor Committee
Elementary, Secondary, & Vocational Education Subcommittee
May 7, 1981

My name is Phyllis Schlafly. I am an author, journalist, lawyer, and volunteer president of Eagle Forum, a national pro-family organization. I am the wife of Fred Schlafly and the mother of six children. I hold a B.A. from Washington University, an M.A. from Harvard University, and a J.D. from Washington University Law School. I am here today because of my unique experience in teaching my children to read.

In 1955, when my first child was five years old, I wanted to give him a headstart by private tutoring so that he could enter a class for gifted children. I took him for a series of lessons to the home of the Alton, Illinois, public school teacher who was in charge of the gifted students. During the tutoring, I would wait for my son while reading a book on her porch.

After a few lessons, it became apparent to me that she wasn't teaching my son to read at all. She was merely teaching him to memorize a few words by associating them with pictures on the page. When I tested him at home, I found that he had memorized a few words, but it was clear that he had no comprehension of the letters or the syllables.

It proved to be my great good fortune that 1955 was the year when Rudolf Flesch's landmark book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, became an overnight bestseller and shook the educational world by exposing how the progressive educationists had eliminated the teaching of phonics from the first grade. His book made a highly persuasive case that phonics is the essential key to learning to read the English language.

Since I consider the ability to read well to be the indispensable tool for all learning, I determined to give my son the very best. I bought the books which Mr. Flesch recommended: *Reading With Phonics* by Hay and Wingo (published by J.B. Lippincott Company), plus the teacher's manual and three workbooks. A friend gave me a little first-grade desk, and I also bought the Calvert Correspondence School used by many American children who live abroad and do not care to enter foreign schools.

I had never been a teacher, and all this was new to me. I followed a regular schedule and gave my oldest son, John, the first grade at home, using the 100 percent Hay-Wingo phonics system. After about two months, he was reading the comic strips himself and anything else he wanted to read. It

was all easy going after those first two months. I hardly ever needed to tell him another word.

The following September, I presented him to the local parochial school and requested entrance into the second grade. A dubious principal insisted on giving him an entrance test. He passed and entered without any problems.

I followed the same pattern with each of my six children: four sons and two daughters. I gave each one the entire first grade at home using the Hay-Wingo *Reading With Phonics* reader and workbooks. My project was a total success. They all entered directly into second grade without any difficulty, were always among the best readers in their classes, and have all gone on to high academic achievement: John, B.S.E.E. and J.D.; Bruce, B.S.E.E. and M.D.; Roger, B.S.E.E. and Ph.D.; Liza, B.A. and to receive her J.D. next year; Andrew to receive his B.S.E.E. this year; Anne is still in high school.

Teaching a child to read does not require money or fancy schools or specially trained teachers. It simply requires teaching the child by the phonics method at the age of five or six — before he has been spoiled by the "sight reading" or other wrong methods.

The plan I followed with my six children was watched with interest by my black housekeeper of 26 years, Mrs. Willie Bea Reed. When her own child was five years old, she wanted to give her the very best, too. She was smart enough to know that being a good reader would open more doors for her daughter than any other skill. I gave her the same dog-eared books plus some new Hay-Wingo workbooks, and lent her the little desk. Mrs. Reed followed the same procedure that I had used.

The moment of truth came when Mrs. Reed entered her child in school and sought admission directly into the second grade. The daughter passed the test with flying colors, was rated as reading two years above her age level, and has been grinding out straight "A's" on her report cards ever since.

When I compare the reading method I used with those used in most schools today, the difference is obvious. The illiterate pupils in the schools today have been deprived of their birthright — their right to read. They simply have not been taught the phonetic sounds of the English language.

You can measure the decline in reading skills by comparing current readers with the old *McGuffey Readers*.

The *McGuffey Readers*, which were widely used across the United States in the early 20th century, are about two years advanced over modern readers of the same grade level in all reading skills, including vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and intellectual and spiritual content.

I used the *McGuffey Readers* with my six children because the stories in most of the widely-used readers (such as the *Dick and Jane* series) were so stupid. The *McGuffey Readers* use some language that is a little old-fashioned for today's world, but the stories are about real people and they hold the child's interest. In addition, the *McGuffey* stories teach the time-honored virtues — love of God, patriotism, thrift, honesty, respect for elders, where there's a will there's a way, the Golden Rule, true courage, manliness, kindness to the less fortunate, obedience to parents, the value of prayer, the consequences of idleness and truancy, crime doesn't pay, and why virtue and love are worth more than material riches. The old *McGuffey Readers* teach morals, faith, and family love.

Modern readers, on the other hand, are completely

Faulty Teaching Fails Children by William Raspberry

It has been a year since we talked about it, and I still can't get the conversation out of my mind. We were talking about former superintendent Vincent Reed's plan to put an end to automatic school promotions, insisting that no child be promoted until he has mastered the grade he was in.

School board member Frank Smith, Jr. had voted against the proposal, a vote that raised my eyebrows practically off my face. How on earth could he oppose such a sensible notion? Surely it made sense to have a child who failed to master the material appropriate to his grade level try it again, perhaps with special remedial help.

"You have in mind a concept of special help being offered on an intensive, perhaps one-to-one basis," Smith told me, reading my mind correctly. "That concept may make sense in terms of what you and I remember from our own school days, but it doesn't square with the reality of what is happening in many of our local schools.

"I constantly walk into classrooms where teachers tell me that only five or six of their 25 students are reading and doing math up to grade level. If you are talking about holding back those 20 students, it would probably wreck the system."

Now since Vincent Reed's proposal dealt only with grades one through three, I've been wondering how it can be that in some schools the *overwhelming majority* of elementary school youngsters can be so far behind in reading and math.

I hear the various explanations -- hunger, parental apathy, cultural deprivation and the rest. I hear about the higher incidence of learning disabilities in some parts of town, or problems with discipline or the absence of role models. It all sounds vaguely reasonable until I think of one thing: These children all (or very nearly all) come to school on Day One knowing their colors.

Now what does knowing one's colors have to do with learning to read? Only this. A child who starts school already knowing his colors (and his alphabet and the rudiments of counting) has already learned so much that you cannot make me believe he is stupid.

Think about it. Here's a kid who at age 4 or earlier has been shown an apple and told "This is red." Then he's handed a piece of wrapping paper or a cap or a crayon and told "This is red."

After an astonishingly short time of such instruction, the child is able to deduce that what you are talking about is not

different. The characters merely run and play, they look up and look down, they hear the duck quack and the cat meow. Their lives are utterly devoid of the standards, the values, the morals, the inspiration, and the ideals -- as well as of the reading and writing skills -- of the *McGuffey Readers*.

My conclusion is that what American youngsters need is a good two- to four-month course in reading-through-phonics in the first grade, plus some good readers on which they can practice their reading skills and at the same time learn the morals and values that built this great nation. The literacy crisis in the United States today doesn't need any federal money, any new studies or new programs, any more highly-trained teachers, or any new schools.

I concur with the recent column written by William Raspberry (copy attached) in which he states: "Faulty techniques for teaching reading have crippled a thousand times more children than cultural deprivation, dyslexia and incompetent parenting put together."

We'd all be better off if we just gave the Hay-Wingo phonics books to every parent with a five-year-old child and said, "Teach your child yourself."

shape, texture or edibility, but the fact that these various objects all reflect light waves of approximately the same length. Once he deduces what you are looking for, he easily learns green and blue and yellow.

And yet educators insist that I must accept that a child who has demonstrated this rather astounding ability to abstract one of an endless variety of qualities and to build on the abstraction is too stupid to learn to read.

I don't believe it. I don't believe it of middle-class children, and I don't believe it of the children of the slums, who in addition to learning such fun things as colors and numbers as a routine part of growing up must frequently also learn how to look out for themselves in ways that would shame a child of affluence. (What middle-class parent would deem his own 6-year-old capable of going to the neighborhood store without being struck by a car at the first intersection)?

And yet I don't doubt that Frank Smith is correct, that a lot of inner-city youngsters of proven learning ability don't learn after they are in school. They may start off at or near the national norms for their age group, but almost routinely they fall further and further behind as they move through school. Why? Surely there must be an answer that doesn't postulate diminished mental ability.

Rudolph "Why Johnny Can't Read" Flesch is sure he knows the answer. It is that Johnny can't read because he hasn't been properly taught — that is, he hasn't been taught phonics.

He made the point 25 years ago, and he makes it again in his latest book, "Why Johnny *Still* Can't Read." Thousands of schools, he says, still don't use phonics as a *system* for teaching reading, although nearly all primary teachers will tell you that they do use phonics. The trouble, says Flesch, is that they do a smattering of phonics in the general context of look-say. The result is that the children can't handle words they haven't been specifically taught, which is to say they can't read.

Tell me that Flesch overestimates the value of phonics, and I'll tell you that I believe faulty techniques for teaching reading have crippled a thousand times more children than cultural deprivation, dyslexia and incompetent parenting put together.

from *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1981

Eagle Forum Launches Headstart Reading Project

The failure of so many U.S. schools to teach first graders to read is one of the shocking facts of our times. Pick up almost any newspaper or magazine, and you will find specific evidence of

- the high illiteracy rate of young Americans,
- young people looking for jobs who cannot read or write well enough to fill out a job application.
- boys and girls receiving high school diplomas who cannot read or write,
- businesses conducting reading courses because job applicants cannot read the instructions on industrial equipment,
- the armed services conducting reading courses because volunteer servicemen cannot read the instructions on military and naval weaponry and equipment,
- colleges and universities conducting courses in basic English so students can read college textbooks,
- textbooks at every level being rewritten in a restricted vocabulary,
- the steady 18-year decline in the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, both verbal and math.

Liberal and establishment journals -- from metropolitan newspapers to the *Wall Street Journal* to *Newsweek* to the *New Republic* -- have just recently discovered what readers of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* have known for years. The disease of illiteracy is now so epidemic that it can't be concealed any longer.

This situation is not the fault of the pupils. It is not because pupils lack a mysterious quality called "reading readiness." Every normal five or six year old is ready to learn to read. All the child needs is somebody to teach him in the first grade.

This situation is not the fault of the teachers; they are usually not permitted to choose the textbooks and methods they teach. The curriculum is mandated by some higher educational authority than the first grade teacher. Furthermore, many teachers are overworked and must spend most of their time keeping order in the classroom instead of teaching.

During the same period that reading and writing skills have plunged, federal spending on education has skyrocketed. It is clear that federal money is not the solution to the problem. Yet Congressional hearings show that both educators and politicians still think in terms of spending more taxpayers' money rather than confronting the root of the problem.

The primary problem is the failure to teach reading through phonics in the first grade. If the child doesn't learn to read well in the first grade, he simply cannot cope with what follows in grades 2 through 12. The one thing that nearly all high school dropouts have in common is that they cannot read.

What Does Phonics Mean?

What does "phonics" mean and why is it so important? Phonics means teaching a child the phonetic sounds, syllables and letters of the English language. When you train a child in phonics, you give him the building blocks of words so he can "unlock" (read) them himself. If the child doesn't know phonics, he can only recite the few words he has memorized. Of course, unless a child learns phonics, he cannot spell.

When a child hasn't been taught phonics, he may do such ridiculous things as read "pony" for "horse," or "vacation" for "holiday."

If you check with your local school and are told that phonics is taught, don't think that solves the problem. Schools have been saying that ever since Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read* came out in 1955 -- but most schools are just playing games with words. Most schools *don't* teach phonics in the first grade as the *key* to reading. For a full explanation of the deception practiced on children, parents, and taxpayers, see Flesch's 1981 book *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* (Harper & Row, \$10.95). To get the full benefit, the system of phonics must be taught *first, before* the child learns any wrong reading methods.

Headstart Reading Course

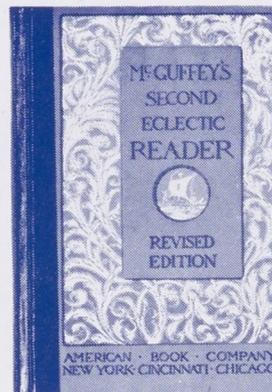
The "Eagle Forum Education and Legal Defense Fund" was established this year as an educational and charitable organization. (Application for income tax-deductibility as a 501(c) (3) organization is now pending.) Its first project is the "Headstart Reading Course." This is an adult-to-child volunteer program in which anyone can participate who is caring, patient, and willing to volunteer two hours a day, five days a week, for two or three months.

Fill out the Headstart Application Form immediately so you can begin this month and make constructive use of wasted summer hours by giving one or more children a headstart on the first grade.

Who can be a Headstart Volunteer Teacher? You can. Anyone can. Any loving mother or father who wants to give her child the key to success in school. Any caring grandparent or aunt who wants to give a child a gift more valuable than anything money can buy. Anyone who has extra time and wants to practice true charity by helping a disadvantaged child to get a headstart in the world. No college diploma or teacher license is required.

Who can be a Headstart Pupil? Any five, six or seven year old child, regardless of race, creed, color, sex, economic or social class. Best results are obtained when the Headstart Reading Program is given during the summer or year *before* the child enters the first grade.

Is the Headstart Project designed to be a substitute for school? No. It is designed to teach the child to read by the correct method (phonics-first) before the school confuses the child with any wrong methods.



The Eagle Forum Headstart Reading Course includes the following materials:

Headstart Reading Course #1:

Phonics Text/Workbook A \$5.00 ___
 Teacher's Edition A 6.00 ___
 McGuffey Primer 5.00 ___
 McGuffey First Reader 5.00 ___

Headstart Reading Course #2:

Phonics Text/Workbook B \$5.00 ___
 Teacher's Edition B 6.00 ___
 McGuffey Second Reader 5.00 ___
 Phonics Text/Workbook C 5.00 ___
 Teacher's Edition C 6.00 ___
 Speller 6.00 ___

Course #1 Package Price 20.00 ___

Course #2 Package Price 32.00 ___

Note: The Phonics Text/Workbooks are all by authors Hay, Hletko, and Wingo and are J.B. Lippincott titles now published by Harper & Row. The McGuffey Readers are unchanged from the original readers in use in this country generations ago.

Each child needs his own Text/Workbooks and his own Readers. However, one Teacher's Edition will suffice if you are teaching two or more children.

Order Form

To: Eagle Forum Education Fund, Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002.

I hereby apply to be a Headstart Volunteer Teacher. Send me the Course or books checked above. Enclosed is my payment of \$ _____.

I cannot teach a child myself, but I will make a tax-deductible contribution to enable someone else to teach a disadvantaged child. Amount of donation: \$ _____.

Limited funds are available for those who want to teach a disadvantaged child. I certify that the Headstart Reading Course sent to me will be used to teach a child unable to pay for the books. The child's name is:

_____ Child's phone: _____

Name _____ (please print)

Street _____ City _____

State _____ Zip _____ Phone _____

"Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." James 1:22.

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