



The

Phyllis Schlafly Report



VOL. 19, NO. 2, SECTION 1

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SEPTEMBER, 1985

Phonics — The Key To Reading

A children's advocacy organization called Design for Change has reported shocking statistics on Chicago schools. Of the 39,500 students who entered Chicago public high schools in the fall of 1980, only 18,500 were graduated in 1984. Of those who did graduate, only 6,000 had 12th grade reading ability while 5,000 others had only 8th grade reading skills or less.

When the figures for minorities are separated out, the situation is even worse. Of the 25,500 blacks and Hispanics who entered Chicago schools in 1980, only 9,500 were graduated four years later, and only 2,000 had 12th grade reading ability.

One reason why America has 23 million functional illiterates is that precious time is spent on non-academic subjects and psychological manipulation instead of on basic skills, and precious energies are directed at resisting the efforts of parents to find out what is going on.

The major reason why we have 23 million functional illiterates is that the proven best method of teaching reading — PHONICS IN THE FIRST GRADE — is not used in 85% of U.S. public schools.

Let me share with you a letter from one of the thousands of parents who have successfully used the phonics reading program distributed by Eagle Forum Education & Legal Defense Fund since 1981. "Phonics" means teaching the sounds and syllables of the English language (so the child can put them together like building blocks) instead of having the child memorize a few "whole words" (without understanding the relationship between the letters and the sounds).

"Dear Mrs. Schlafly: I can't thank you enough! I took your advice about teaching my five-year-old to read, using the phonics method, and it worked! Eight months ago, she couldn't read at all, but today she can pull almost any book off her bookshelf and read it by herself — including some books intended for kids twice her age.

"I can't help being amazed, especially since I never had any teacher training at all, and my daughter is not (so far as I can tell) particularly gifted; yet in eight months' time, working with her less than an hour a day (and skipping some days when the weather was too nice to stay inside), I have her reading better than her friends who have spent a year or longer in school. Now she spends several hours a day reading, by her own choice. I never even have to suggest it!

"Her writing and spelling skills are also very good, though we didn't work on them specifically. They seem to have come as a fringe benefit of learning to read.

"I wish there were some way I could thank you adequately. You have made such a difference in our lives!"

All over the country, parents are having the same experience. They are discovering the thrill and achievement of homeschooling. Incidentally, "homeschooling" has now become a verb (as in, "I am homeschooling my children"); and homeschooling is the fastest growing movement in the country today.

Parents are discovering that teaching children to read simply requires the correct method plus love and patience; it doesn't require a teacher's credentials.

This is not a reflection on teachers; it's a criticism of the faulty first-grade textbooks teachers are compelled to use. The same mail which brought the above letter from a successful homeschooling mother in Wisconsin, brought another letter from a teacher in the same state, which I shall also share with you.

"Dear Mrs. Schlafly: Soon after Dr. Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* appeared in 1955, the Reading Establishment, its pet publishers, and its textbook authors added a 'dribble' of phonics to each of their books from 1st to 8th, and to the 12th grade in some schools. The outlines call for the learning of two or three letters or letter combinations in no logical or organized succession for each grade from 1st to 12th.

"Parents, teachers and administrators seem to think that taking 8 to 12 years to teach (maybe) the *same* letter sounds is the phonics method, but it isn't. They seem to think that this phony-phonics in today's readers is 'for real.' The fact is that teachers are really still using the 'look-say' ('whole-word' or 'sight-reading') method.

"No wonder kids can't spell when they don't practice saying or sounding out or writing the individual letters in words! Just sounding out the words would help children to spell English words, 85% of which are purely phonetic; the other 15% are only partly non-phonetic.

"We teachers heard many criticisms of 'progressive education,' but no mention of the omission of the phonetic reading courses for primary teachers ever reached us. As many children came to our 4th to 12th grade classes with reading problems (after the old

phonics-taught teachers left our schools), we teachers in the upper grades just thought that the new primary-grade teachers were not efficient. We didn't dream that they hadn't been teaching phonics!

"The man in our school who is in charge of the prevention of 'dropouts' says that the students who have school problems in most cases are those who have problems with reading.

"The most tragic result of the 'look-say' non-method is that millions of children have been *erroneously* labelled 'dyslectic' or 'learning disabled.' The Michigan Reading Clinic examined over 30,000 *alleged* dyslectic children in 1975. Of these, only two children were found to be unable to learn to read. It makes one wonder what other states would discover if their alleged dyslectics were examined.

"I blame the Reading Establishment, their pet greedy publishers, and the professors in the teachers' colleges who author the textbooks, who won't admit that 'look-say' does *not* work in the teaching of reading, writing and spelling. How can they remain so stupid? Thank you again for your many articles about the need to return to phonics."

The Great Debate About Reading

The "phonics-first" versus the "look-say" method of teaching children to read has been a burning education controversy ever since the publication of Rudolf Flesch's 1955 book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Generally, those with a vested interest in the school system and textbooks try to belittle the phonics advocates as lacking in teaching credentials.

One study, however, which was not ignored because it came from a source with impressive education credentials, and also was written in the cushioned circumlocution of educational jargon, was a 1967 book by Dr. Jeanne S. Chall called *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. It was based on a three-year study (1962-1965) of beginning reading methods which was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York; it also covered the relevant research on this subject from 1910 to 1965.

Dr. Chall's book, which cautiously indicated the superiority of phonics over look-say, became an education best-seller. It stimulated professional symposia and turned out to be a book that had to be addressed by any research on the subject done after that.

For the two decades before her book was published, reading textbooks had virtually achieved what she tactfully called a consensus on the look-say method. Her book broke the total monopoly which the look-say approach then held over reading textbooks, and subsequent readers became look-say readers sprinkled lightly with phonics (as one might salt a TV dinner).

In 1984, Dr. Chall published an "Updated Edition" designed to answer the many inquiries she received since 1967 on what has happened since then. The new edition is the original book in full plus a new 52-page section at the beginning (with seven pages of references) entitled, "Introduction to the Second Edition: An Update."

This updated section is by far the most important part of the book and is "must" reading for any serious student of the question of *why* we have 23 million functional illiterates today. But an "error" was made by the publisher (McGraw-Hill); the Table of Contents lists only the 1967 Introduction and text and does not show that the new section exists, so that few people who pick up the book will realize that it contains much new research which confirms and strengthens the earlier findings.

Dr. Chall notes that currently-used readers show a definite movement toward more emphasis on phonics and toward teaching it earlier. Yet, she notes that the "great debate" of the late 1960s still goes on with emotion and passion on both sides.

She notes that fewer researchers ask which approach produces the better *results*; instead, more seem to ask which is the better *theory*. In addition to the crux of the debate over phonics versus look-say, the jargon includes such variations as whether reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game" or a process of "decoding print into spoken form."

In view of the impressive research showing better performance by the phonics method, Dr. Chall now wonders in print why the debate over reading methods is so ideological, so much concerned with theory, instead of addressing itself to the question of which method produces the better results. She finds this "puzzling" because so much more evidence exists today as to what works in practice.

She asks, could it be that the phonics debate is only a part of a much broader debate — one concerned with how children are to be educated and what they are to be taught, rather than merely with whether or not they can read?

She points out that, if primary reading methods alone were the problem, educators would accept the results of the research which shows the validity of the phonics methods. Yet, she says, the "strong positions, both in the 1960s and in the 1980s, on issues that seem to keep coming back again and again in different forms, suggest broader reasons."

Dr. Chall says that one reason might be the substantial financial investment in the present elementary textbook series and its monetary rewards to the authors and publishers. There are only about 13 publishers that publish reading textbook series and the four most popular have more than 50% of the sales; it takes \$25 million to invest in a new series.

Dr. Chall suggests that the more important reason is the differences in philosophies and goals of education. The look-say method is associated with "progressive education" while phonics is associated with "traditional schooling, with drill and hard work."

Censorship of Phonics

"A Nation at Risk," the title of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was the subject of a debate in which I participated in front of several thousand elementary school teachers attending a state convention on Reading in one of our nation's

largest states. I expressed general agreement with the Commission's conclusions that today's high level of functional illiteracy (23 million adults) is a major problem.

A functional illiterate is someone who cannot read the "help wanted" sections of the newspapers, fill out a job application, or read traffic signs or the label on a medicine bottle. Anyone who cannot do those things is truly "at risk" in modern society.

I argued for the use of *phonics* in the *first grade* as the best proven method of teaching children to read, write and spell the English language. Phonics means teaching children to read by *first* teaching them the sounds and syllables of the English language; with these skills, they can put the syllables together like building blocks and quickly acquire a reading vocabulary as large as their oral vocabulary.

My opponent, a professor well-known in the field of education, disagreed. It wasn't clear what method he advocated, but it was evident that he thinks today's schools are doing a splendid job and that critics of the schools are just plain wrong.

When it came to the question time, I asked him: "When a state textbook adoption committee selects seven elementary reading series from which local school boards can choose the one they want, don't you think that one out of the seven could or should be a phonics system?" He answered flatly, "No."

The censorship of first-grade phonics books is one of the most curious quirks of professional educators today. They are not willing for local school systems even to have the option to choose a phonics system; they must be afraid that the non-phonics system cannot stand the competition.

The phonics-first system and the non-phonics system produce vast differences in the number of words a child can read. In a typical non-phonics elementary reading series, the child can read 350 words by the end of the first grade, 1,000 words by the end of the second grade, 1,250 words by the end of the third grade, and 1,550 words by the end of the fourth grade.

Using the typical phonics-first system, by the end of the first grade the child can read the estimated 24,000 words in his speaking and listening vocabulary, and 40,000 words by the end of the fourth grade. Yet only about 15% of public schools today use a phonics-first reading system.

My follow-up question at the debate was, "If everything is A-OK with current reading methods, then how is it that spelling is such a terrible problem among young people looking for a job?" He simply denied that spelling is a problem.

The Sad State of Spelling

The same week as that debate, I received a packet of letters written by members of a course in Rhetoric at a large midwestern state university. The instructor had given the students the assignment to read and to comment on an article by me. After they turned in their papers, she put them all in a big brown envelope and forwarded them to me. The teacher must have been proud of her students' work. There was no other reason to send them to me. I never would have otherwise known about her assignment.

All the papers were written by college students who presumably had graduated from high school. Here is a sampling of the misspelled words: "ellimination, expecially, discribing, predujicing, opertunity, ment (meant), amoung, eviroment, interfear, posative, attension, uncanning (uncanny), cruxify, femenist, wether, exspect."

One student didn't know the difference between to and two. Few students used apostrophes, either for contractions or for possessives (typical examples: "mens leadership" and "its just a vicious circle"). "More easier" was another typical mistake.

Even more depressing than the spelling, the syntax, and the grammar was the lack of ability to communicate clear thoughts. Here is a typical example: "I don't think that woman liberation movement reason for doing everything is to be against man. Men aren't thought of as enemys just equals. That all they want from them and that what they can expect from us."

In 1984, the U.S. Department of Education conducted seven days of hearings across the country to receive public comment on regulations for the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment. The Department hired a different court reporter to record and transcribe the approximately seven hours of testimony in each of seven cities, resulting in 1,300 pages of typed testimony. Court reporters are the most highly paid stenographers because they are considered to be the most experienced and accurate. (These are the Hearings which were subsequently published in the book, *Child Abuse in the Classroom*.)

The following sampling of some of the misspelled words in the official record of the Department of Education Hearings is a stunning commentary on the failure of the schools to teach pupils to spell. These spelling errors were made by the stenographers, not by the witnesses, since all the testimony was taken down orally. We did not include words that could be considered to be mere typing mistakes.

"Able (Cain's brother), abstinence, addage, ammdement, angeles, arbiture, arithematic, attornies, authoritariun, autonamous, Bethlehem, biase, birage, blatently.

"Cognative, concensus, conondrome, contimum, contoled, contraversial, courier, criterion, cirriculum, water over the damn, debator, defenseible, desparate, deterrant, devestate, devastation, dilemna, disasterous, dispell, dissention, domaine.

"Eletist, eliteism, Encyclopedia Brittanica, enteries, errode, esprit de corps, establishment, estensive, experimantal, experimenter, falacy, frautulent, genicide, harrassment, hassale, Senator Orin Hatch, holocaust, inaugerated, illigetimacy, influencial, ladys, lavishilly, liason, librarys, legitimate, Longefellow.

"Monstor, necessarey, nineth, nongermaine, observers, penenteniaries, perpertrators, perserverance, picinic, portested, psycologists, publically, puzeled, questionnaire.

"Realations, refered, President Regan, regemented, regimin, relinquisted, resistence, scandalous, secular, silouettes, sponsered, squeel, stemming, submisive, terrony (tyranny), theareted, thearetical, Unbudsmen, uncontrovertable, varios, veneral, violant, voccabulary."

Don't laugh — this isn't funny. Anger is a more appropriate response. The Department of Education transcripts prove that, when the schools stopped teaching first-graders how to read by the phonics method and instead filled up school hours with the exercises in "attitudes" and "feelings," spelling was one of the Basics which fell between the cracks. Students introduced to the disastrous Dick and Jane "look say" readers 20-30 years ago are now working adults who can't spell.

Homeschooling: A Fast Growing Movement

Until the 20th century, homeschooling was the principal form of education. Most of the great men and women of history, including George Washington and other Founding Fathers, were educated at home. Even in modern times, some of our most successful Americans received most of their early education at home, including General Douglas MacArthur and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

Nobody is saying that we should not have public schools. Most parents are only too glad to have the public schools take their kids off their hands for hours every day and try to educate them. It will be the rare parent who has enough commitment and concern to embark on a homeschooling program.

It is unlikely that any significant percentage of parents would care enough to commit themselves to homeschooling. Estimates of the number of American children being homeschooled today range from a half million to one million — a drop in the bucket compared to the 44 million children in public and private schools.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the real reason for the animosity toward homeschooling is a paranoid fear — not of competition from any significant numbers of children being removed from the public schools, but of competition from the superior academic performance and social well-being of the children who are homeschooled.

Parents have a variety of different reasons for making the decision to homeschool their children. For some, it is that they don't want their children to be in an atmosphere of drugs and lack of discipline. For others, it is a desire to give their children a religious, instead of anti-religious, education. For still others, it is a desire to meet the special needs of a handicapped child.

For some, it is simply to give their children a superior academic education. That was my reason. I wanted my children to be skillful practitioners in reading and writing the English language; I wanted them to have the benefit of teaching by the phonics method in the first grade. No school available to my children taught phonics in the first grade, so I taught them myself. The results in terms of later academic achievement by our six children were spectacular.

More and more research is coming out all the time which shows the academic and social superiority of homeschooling. Homeschoolers average about 30

percentile points higher on standardized achievement measures than do classroom students. One study of achievement scores accepted in court on children of 30 homeschooling families who were being prosecuted or threatened showed that the children were in the 80.1 percentile of children who take standardized tests.

Unable to show that homeschooled children are inferior academically, the harassing educationists have shifted to claiming that children taught at home will be inferior in adjusting to "the group." That's exactly why many parents want to homeschool their children; they don't want them to be subject to peer pressure on drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, depression, and disrespect for moral and parental authority. That in itself is a perfectly valid reason for parents to homeschool their children.

Former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, just before he left office in 1984, made a slashing attack on textbook publishers for what he called "dumbing down" their books to accommodate pupils at the bottom of the class. Today's schoolbooks are characterized by a limited, controlled vocabulary, choppy and childish sentences, and boring stories.

The reason why textbooks have been "dumbed down" is to accommodate children who have been deprived of phonics in the first grade. They simply cannot read the classics. They can read only boring books with a limited vocabulary.

The answer to this horrendous problem is *not* more government money. Spelling will be improved only when true phonics is returned to the first grade. Students have a right to learn how to read, write, and spell the English language. Parents, educators, and elected officials have the responsibility to see that they get their right to read. As George Orwell said, if people cannot write well, they cannot think well. If they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them.

Headstart Reading Course #1:

Phonics Workbook A	\$10.00	_____
Teacher's Edition A	10.00	_____
McGuffey First Reader	8.00	_____
Price for Complete Set #1: \$26.00 _____		

Headstart Reading Course #2:

Phonics Workbook B	\$10.00	_____
Teacher's Edition B	10.00	_____
McGuffey Second Reader	8.00	_____
Phonics Workbook C	10.00	_____
Teacher's Edition C	10.00	_____
Price for Complete Set #2: \$46.00 _____		

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Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002
ISSN0556-0152

Published monthly by The Eagle Trust Fund, Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002.

Second Class Postage Paid at Alton, Illinois.
Subscription Price: \$10 per year. Extra copies available: 50 cents each; 4 copies \$1; 30 copies \$5; 100 copies \$10.