

INSIDE EDUCATION

READING RACE SERIES

Part 3: Cacophony (a mishmash) of Reading Issues

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Part 2 stressed 11 lessons to be learned for the new *Madison Literacy Task Force*, but the same would be true for any reading task force or advisory group especially when Part 1 is included.

It's should be clear from the first two parts that a great deal of research and information has been done relating to reading, so a logical question to ask is whether this trove of data has improved reading after decades of efforts? It was answered *rather shockingly and disappointing* during a meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers, "*At National Literacy Summit, State Education Chiefs Warn of Reading Stagnation*," (Kevin Mahnken), T74, 01/27/2020:

An edit of the results follow and reveals, in summary, that credible reading research is apparently ignored by too many educators and that's the main reason why reading results are disastrous; yet, schools supposedly are about learning and growing. The Summit information indicates it is not happening with the most critical skill required for academic success impacting minorities the most—literacy. Actually, it's very hard to believe that this is still a crisis issue in this, the 21st century.

"Reading instruction in American schools is so rife with poor curriculum and pedagogical dogma that a prominent academic likened it to 'the equivalent of chemistry departments teaching alchemy.' We've had about 130 years of bad practice...

Note: Imagine if medical field had 130 years of bad practice for patients, or the corporate world doing the same? Heads would roll! There would be and have been consequences, but not in education.

The roundtable discussion addressed the causes — from poorly prepared teachers to inadequate guidance on curriculum — of the well-documented stagnation in reading achievement across the United States.

Note: How can this happen when teacher preparation institutions must be accredited from an independent group, but not necessarily an unbiased group, involved in a rather rigorous process? There is only one answer and that is that the standards being used are inadequate and/or poorly followed; further, the independent group is also biased since they come from the same education society.

Despite the fact that cognitive scientists have agreed for decades on the best way to prepare young children to read, millions of students are still taught using outmoded or debunked methods with no scientific justification.

Note: Why does this happen? Again, again and again, because of poor principal and teacher evaluations, inadequate teacher training, no consequences for failures, and ineffective, if any, monitoring.

The effects have been greeted by many as cause for alarm. A sobering morning presentation showed that American students' reading performance on international standardized tests like PISA have demonstrated little or no upward movement. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress aggregate reading scores for both fourth- and eighth-graders are essentially unchanged over the past 30 years.

*The most recent release of NAEP results, announced last year, included an even more disturbing finding. While top-performing test takers (those scoring at the 90th percentile) have made slight growth over the past few rounds of the exam, those at the bottom 10th and 25th percentiles have done markedly worse. Only two jurisdictions, Mississippi and Washington, D.C., saw meaningful progress in reading, while dozens of others saw their students' scores drop... **shock and surprise over the recent reading results were only one catalyst for the event.***

The day's most prominent speaker was Emily Hanford, a reporter who gave a lengthy presentation on the bitter conflict fought among proponents of different approaches to reading instruction that 'raged in the 1990's in K-12 classrooms and teacher education departments across the country.

In a recent and highly influential series of reports, **Hanford argued that many trainee teachers are never adequately prepared to teach children how to read.** Their training programs, embedded in schools of education around the country, are often still enthralled to questionable "whole language" philosophies of literacy even as most reading experts have pointed to children's need for greater instruction in phonics....**her characterization of the conflict was broadly held by other experts at the summit.** Emily Solari, a professor of reading education at the University of Virginia, noted that the newfound press interest in literacy had shone a light on a divided field...the reading wars never went away.

Note: Why? The same reason failing schools continue to exist because there are no consequences for not performing effectively.

A few, calling early literacy the 'civil rights issue of our time,' complained of the difficulty of mandating better practices, such as rigorous curricula and tighter teacher certification requirements, **in states where most control over education is devolved to local school districts.**

Molly Spearman, elected state superintendent in 2014, said her perspective on local control shifted when she took office. Being a former legislator, what's been very popular is local control and flexibility...And I supported that from the perspective I was in at that time. But now that I've been in this role as state chief, I see the fallacy there. ... **It's almost un-American to say that the state department is better than the locals. But honestly, I'm beginning to see it that way. Not all locals, but many need our expertise...**

Note: She got it right! That's why I proposed the Reading Renaissance Act in Part 1.

Carey Wright, Mississippi's state superintendent, has recently won plaudits for the significant reading progress made by Mississippi students in the 2019 NAEP results...**she spoke of the disappointment and frustration felt by teachers who reach the end of lengthy training programs only to find themselves ill-prepared to help struggling readers...**

Note: Someone or some college departments did not prepare them well enough; but since there are no consequences for failure, it continues year after year after year.

*We're dealing with children's lives each and every day, and if we're not speaking up for those who can't speak for themselves, then shame on us. ... I look at my job as: We've got control over the school day. **We've got to take control over what we've got control over.***

Note: Right on target; what's puzzling is that the rhetoric is coming from those who are in charge of the system, so what is stopping them from instituting what they recommend? They have the power and authority to mandate the needed changes.

*As the nation's reading challenges have garnered more attention from policymakers and the press, there is some evidence that academics have begun adopting better practices around literacy. A national evaluation of more than 1,000 teacher preparation programs by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that a sizable number, especially at the undergraduate level, have begun providing their teaching candidates with scientifically based reading instructions. **Leading the pack were those based in Mississippi...***

CCSSO would [MUST] push states to take the necessary steps to reshape reading instruction in K-12 classrooms — whether that includes passing laws requiring teacher candidates to study the science of reading, encouraging districts to adopt better curricula or investing in more extensive professional development for veteran instructors. If that active approach ruffles feathers, so be it.

*"Our philosophy is always to bring people together to do the right thing. So we start there, but at the same time, **we have a moral obligation to kids, and the reading scores can't continue the way that they are. We have to move forward.** There are people at education schools around the country who believe in this and want to be partners.*

Note This fine and noble rhetoric has been heard time and time again and, yes, at the state and district levels by superintendents and school boards, but most stumble across the finish line because there are no consequences for failure; until there are severe and meaningful consequences, the rhetoric will NOT result in successful outcomes. This is what history has proven.

Furthermore, the Summit revelations support the theme of this reading series—*The Reading Rat Race*--concerned with a very simple concept: if you *can't read, you cannot learn,*” and nothing could be simpler to understand. It's why reading is the most critical and fundamental skill for schools to 'teach' but to do so effectively for all learners. Of course all schools teach reading, but unfortunately too many students, particularly boys, are shortchanged in the process because of instructional miseducation and malpractice.

This will sound simplistic, but the core of most of the problems in schools—the *Academic Pandemic*—is primarily found in failing [Zombie] schools and revolves around literacy (reading and writing—English Language Arts). In other words, *literacy* is the basic building block for academic and school success. Failure to provide effective literacy skills to all students by third grade, particularly boys of color, is predictive that such students are destined for not just school failure (likely dropouts), but they also become unwilling candidates for the school to prison pipeline—a shameful and disgusting reality students know nothing about at the time (neither do parents). In addition, there are a variety of consequences to society--economically, socially, politically and certainly educationally.

Instead of using the available research, reading failures are excused by schools citing socio-economic conditions over which they have no control. However, the most important and powerful lessons from Parts 1 and 2 contradicts the school excuses because *Developing such ability [reading] is not dependent on intelligence, parent education or socio-economic factors.* Needless to this this is absolutely contrary to popular perceptions and beliefs about what influences reading success. Therefore, every student regardless of income, family background, ethnicity, etc. can be taught to read at a functional level whereas now up to two thirds of minorities do not even achieve proficiency.

Teacher Bias

However there is another issue involved that does not get mentioned often enough—teacher bias: *“A recent study of teachers of all races asked whether they believed African-American male students could be successful in which a majority replied no.”* Therefore, how can they teach them effectively if they don't think they can succeed?

Here I must apologize. I got this quote from an Internet search because I certainly did not make it up, but it will not come up in a search for the source. Yet, it is so compelling as one reason why the reading pandemic impacts the minority boys particularly, that I felt the need to show it, and I would not have done so unless I found supporting evidence.

There are a number of references about teacher bias specifically involving black boys, but what makes this quote alarming is that *all races of teachers* surveyed responded the same. This would then discount the belief that black boys need teachers of color in order to learn (the research on this is inconclusive to say the least). In fact, if it were true, why was there desegregation moving minorities to white schools where teachers of color are rare? Apparently because there was a strong belief that they would learn better in a diverse environment of students, not teachers.

Interestingly and shamefully, the bias begins in preschool: *“Teachers' implicit bias against black students starts in preschool, study finds, Findings reveal subconscious racial bias of teachers, who directed attention more closely to black boys when 'challenging behavior' is expected,* (Yolanda Young) *The Guardian*, 10/04/2016 2016, and it supports the quote that I was unable to reference concerning the bias regardless of race.

“Implicit biases take the form of subtle, sometimes subconscious stereotypes held by white teachers, which had been shown to result in lower expectations and rates of gifted program referrals for black students. Yale's study revealed these biases are directed at much

*younger children than previously thought, **and are present in black and white teachers' behaviors.***

Researchers [Yale Child Study Center] were interested in learning about how teachers detect challenging behavior in the classroom. Sometimes this involves seeing behavior before it becomes problematic...the teachers [on video] were asked to detect 'challenging behavior', no such behavior existed in any of the videos. Yet when asked which children required the most attention, 42% of the teachers identified the black boy.

Note: Is this bias or an indication that black boys are more troublesome despite claims that they are not?

The participants' conscious appraisal of whom they believed required the most attention closely mirrored the independent results of an eye-tracking technology used by the research team, which noted "a tendency to more closely observe black students, and...when teachers were also given information about the disruptive child's home life and family stressors, teachers only reacted more empathetically if the teacher and student were of the same race. Otherwise, teachers rated the students more severely. The report suspects this is because teachers felt powerless to improve the student's situation.

"These findings suggest that teachers need support in understanding family struggles as they may relate to child behaviors, especially when the teacher and child are of different races...The good news is that teachers are open and willing to do the work.

Can't Read? Drop out!

"On the education front one way to move from anger to action...make sure all are proficient in reading," (Alan Borsuk), *Schoolinfosystems.org*, 06/06/2020, shocks with the first sentence:

"Success in reaching proficiency in reading is shockingly low among students from low-income homes and those who are black or Hispanic."

Wisconsin has the worst reading results in the Nation, only 13% of black grade 4 & 8 were rated as proficient or better in reading in 2019 and most shocking, it has not changed in the last two decades. Have they tried to make things better? Yes, but nothing changes.

"Literacy strongly correlates with a myriad of social and economic outcomes, and children who are not proficient by the fourth grade are much more likely than their proficient peers to face a series of accumulating negative consequences."

One of which is the ***"Illiteracy-to-Incarceration Pipeline*** (Part 5) causing up to 80% of dropouts being incarcerated for various crimes all because of functional illiteracy that prevents job success. FURTHER, IT DOES NOT REGISTER WHERE IT SHOULD—THE THREE MONKEY SYNDROME: SEE NOTHING, HEAR NOTHING, SAY NOTHING! DENIAL PERSONIFIED!

Without any doubt it's the single most perplexing issue with the boy problem causing a wide range of academic, behavior, and mental health problems. In addition, it's the primary reason for crime because students (mostly boys) who do not acquire the necessary reading skills in the schoolhouse by grade 3 have a lasting ***can't read, can't learn*** syndrome that results in dropping out of school, then onto the urban streets with gangs of dropouts and drugs; finally they move from the streets to the prison cells. In the process they commit up to 80% of the crimes; worse yet, within five years, 80% return to their prison cells after committing more crimes. Although this is factual and simple to understand, it's far to perplexing to understand by educators, law enforcement personnel, policymakers, and politicians.

Incidentally this does not take rocket science to figure out; just find one school or school district where 80% or more of boys are reading at grade level that don't reveal positive school behavior, mental health statistics, and few incarcerations. If no such school or district can be found, it will expose the failure of reading consequences resulting in the ***School to Prison***

Pipeline only found in FAILING public schools mostly located in the cities. To understand what is at stake, the discussion must start with understanding the other issues and factors involved among which is a very interesting survey of parents about their sons and daughters, *Brookings Institute*, (Reeves and Smith), 10/07/2020:

*“Americans are in general more worried about the prospects for boys than for girls, and for their own sons more than their own daughters, according to new data from the **American Family Survey [2020]**. Conservatives and men are most concerned about boys in general...liberals are more worried about their sons than the daughters. Overall, women are also more worried about boys than about girls...”*

These worries are neither ill-founded, nor incompatible with continued concerns about the barriers faced by girls and women. Boys and young men, especially those of color and/or from less advantaged backgrounds, are in fact struggling on a number of fronts, including education, mental health, family formation and employment...

Along with many other issues, gender equality has become politically polarized in recent years, with the feminist left pointing to a ‘war on women’ and the anti-feminist right pointing to a ‘war on boys.’”

Noteworthy is that the worries about their sons does not seem to translate with information on the Internet of any changes in school practices and policies, nor is it impacting the reading wars dramatized by the poor reading results because that should be the essence of their concerns.

The Reading Wars

Apparently, there is nothing really new about the reading wars.

“Noah Webster believed in phonics, Horace Mann in the word method. In the late 1920s, as schools began to switch from phonics to whole-word reading instruction...By the 1980s, the glory decade for whole-language, the pendulum had swung again.

Previously the reading wars were confined largely to education, but it then erupted into a full-fledged political issue during the 1980’s when there was a national concern to raise standards pushed by federal reform described in ***The Reading Wars***, (Nicholas Lemann), *The Atlantic*, 11/1997. The issue became concentrated in California because of Bill Honig, State Superintendent:

“He wanted not merely to make teachers and students submit to tests of competence but to change what was taught...to the point of obsession”.

Note: Unfortunately, it didn’t last. He was *“indicted, tried, and convicted of having given state funds to an education foundation on whose board his wife sat.”*

“In each of the past three years California legislators have passed bills designed to force the state’s public schools to move the needle in reading instruction away from whole-language and toward its archenemy -- the phonics method. The view is that politicians have never before tried to dictate specific teaching methods to this extent.”

This occurred in 1997, but as will be seen in (Part 4, Lawsuits), it did not get implemented successfully because it took a lawsuit to finally resolve the reading problem 20 years later.

The Summit meeting confirmed that the reading wars are alive and well with boy causalities littering the battlefields year after year. Actually, the battles continue even though the reading war was won with the last shot declaring the *Science of Reading* the winner without regard to gender, race/ethnicity, poverty etc.; until there is a peace treaty signed, the war will continue. It’s insane and mindless; but perhaps it really is not about reading itself, but perhaps other issues.

Related issues to make it more complex and confusing is the jaundiced judicial system, legislative lunacy, and “political correctness” involving the issues of “equity,” “diversity,” and “discrimination,” as well as, the feminist agenda to give girls priority over boys despite the fact that they now outperform boys in just about every educational outcome.

How can the quest for equality be achieved when the results are dramatically unequal? Isn't being trapped in the "bondage of illiteracy" the most intolerable and vicious form of discrimination?

The PDK article, "*Sixty Years of Reading Research*," previously cited is emphatic in its conclusion that "*the research overwhelmingly favors holistic, literature-centered approach to reading. Indeed, the proof is massive and overwhelming.*" Wow, that should certainly settle the debate. Obviously, it hasn't!

Another reason why the battles continue. E. D. Hirsch, author of "*The Schools We Need and Why We don't Have Them*," repudiates the hundreds of studies cited in the research reviewed in the PDK (Phi Beta Kappa) article. He states: "*The consensus in research is that the reviews are worst practice, not 'best practice.'*" However, his view is supported by a new report "*Whole Language Lives On*," Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 10/2000: "*Reading isn't being handled well in American schools. Four in ten of our fourth-graders lack basic reading skills.*" Could it be that they were never taught to read? Of course not, they just don't do it effectively for boys.

The report goes on to state that "*we also know what doesn't work for most children—whole language....it persists despite efforts by policymakers and experts to root it out.*"

Why does it persist? Because implementation is not monitored to ensure that the effort or plan is monitored to ensure that the implementation is being done to promote learning. What happens too often is that some plan or goal is required to be implemented (put into action), but then it is left up to the districts, schools and classroom teachers to follow through with poor directions and support.

After decades of discussion and debate, thousands of studies and articles, educators continue to stumble and stammer through the briar patch—with the thorns of contradictory beliefs and interpretation keeping parents in painful anxiety trying to understand why there is still no consensus about the best way to teach reading for boys particularly.

Testing and Research

Still more distressing is test data indicating that "*since 1980 there has been no improvement in average reading [NAEP] scores for 9 and 13 year-olds.*" Considering the fact that during this time many "have been instituted (class sizes have been lowered, standards were raised at least on paper, professional development was intensified, and increased dollars were allocated); it's obvious that such factors continue to dominate the discussions, but obviously have had no positive impact on improving reading results. What has not changed are attitudes, practices, and perceptions.

A sobering picture of the status of boys and girls in terms of achievement is revealed in "*A 'Disturbing' Assessment: Sagging Reading Scores, Particularly for Eighth-Graders, Headline 2019's Disappointing NAEP Results*," (Kevin Mahnken), T74, 10/30/2019:

"Trends that are essentially flat in mathematics and down in reading. Most states saw little or no improvement in either subject, with their lowest-performing students showing the most significant declines in scores. Whether the cause lies in hangover effects from the Great Recession, missteps in federal education policy, or some combination of these and other factors, there has been little progress to be assessed for over a decade."

Actually this has been the trend for the past 40 years, and it's information that schools do not readily disclose along with the media.

"We have an education system that's largely ignoring, or doesn't understand, the research on teaching skills to read... We just don't really pay attention to the research about how to get every child reading by third grade, even though it's pretty well documented how to do that...since 1992, no growth for the lowest-performing students in 4th or 8th grade reading... our students who are struggling the most at reading are where they were nearly 30 years ago.

Overall results for eighth-grade reading — the lone, if modest, highlight in 2017's scores, with a gain of a single point— provided the greatest cause for despair this time around, sinking by three percentage points. The percentage of fourth-graders testing 'proficient' in the subject...dropped from 37% in 2017 to 3% today; the percentage of proficient eighth-graders sagged from 36% to 33% over the same period...Results over the past 10 years have left education reformers at a loss to explain why."

The question is why haven't reading scores improved in particular for boys and boys of color? It's explained in "***Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years,***" (Natalie Wexler), *The Atlantic*, 04/13/2018.

"Reading scores have been flat since 1998, with just a third or so of students performing at a level the NAEP defines as 'proficient.' Performance gaps between lower-income students and their more affluent peers, among other demographic discrepancies, have remained stubbornly wide.

*Among the likely culprits for the stalled progress: **a misalignment** between what the NAEP tests and what state standards require teachers to cover at specific grade levels. But what's the reason for the utter lack of progress in reading scores?*

Note: It's an incomplete question; it should end with "*of boys in failing inner city school; in reality, only 800 districts!*"

*The current instructional approach is based on assumptions about how children learn that have been disproven by research over the last several decades—**research that the education world has largely failed to heed.***

Cognitive scientists have known for decades that simply mastering comprehension skills doesn't ensure a young student will be able to apply them to whatever texts they're confronted with on standardized tests and in their studies later in life."

Professor Timothy Shanahan, University of Illinois, and the author/editor of over 200 publications on literacy debunks a popular approach that goes hand in hand with teaching comprehension skills:

"To help students practice their 'skills,' teachers give them texts at their supposed individual reading levels rather than the level of the grade they're in.

No evidence backs up that practice. Recent research indicates that students learn more from reading texts that are considered too difficult for them—in other words, those with more than a handful of words and concepts a student doesn't understand.

*While some elementary teachers have embraced the approach advocated by the NAEP panel, it's clear that **most have been trained in methods that aren't supported by research, and that many are resistant to change."***

Note: What would happen in the corporate world if employees resisted needed changes? There would be consequences. In schools, there are no consequences, except when students don't follow instructions.

Terrible Teacher Training

This is a clear indictment of many ***Schools of Education*** that fail to train teachers according to what the research clearly indicates. Yet, these are some of the same professor who cry for more time to do research. Apparently, it's research to nowhere. Either the professors do not keep up with the research or they simply ignore it because of their own philosophical reading beliefs.

Furthermore, there is consistent research that teachers do not use what is indicated as the best practices from research and the subject matter doesn't make a difference. Is it because they do not keep up on the research or ignore it? Part of the reason is that administrators who evaluate

teachers are complicit in this practice because of their own lack of knowledge. Therefore, there should be no surprise why reading stays flat; and unless teaching and evaluation practices change, it will stay that way. Like it or not, the regular classroom teachers at all grade levels must take on far more responsibility for recognizing and remediating reading problems; but, it is not happening. Why not?

Research on how kids learn to read has not always penetrated the teaching profession, though it's not entirely the fault of the teachers. Instead, it's because approaches to reading based on the mechanics of language don't appear to be consistently taught in teacher-preparation programs or in early reading professional-development opportunities; and, it certainly is not coming from the "higher ups" like the state departments of education.

However, there was a glimmer of hope in that the need for teacher-training was recognized with the passage of *The Reading Excellence Act [1998]*, a competitive discretionary grant program to states to improve K-3 reading estimated to involve 1600 schools in 17 states. It provided millions of dollars for professional development as a way to improve children's reading skills and abilities; but unfortunately, without any mandatory guidelines to determine how success was to be assessed (without assessment there is no accountability). Obviously, it was a failure because over 20 years later, the problem remains the same.

Unless the training is substantial and on-going, particularly with respect to ethnic groups and boys, such "training" will not produce the desired results. In addition, it is wrongly assumed that training and education automatically translates to actual application in the classroom; it does not unless there is effective classroom supervision and monitoring—not just an occasional or no teacher evaluation observations to insure that the training is, in fact, reinforced in the classroom. Sadly, it is not happening because two-thirds of the states no longer require such observations and evaluations.

Ho-hum, the words are powerful and certainly sincere, but they overlook one rather annoying fact that children being homeschooled learn to read without all of the certification requirements. Perhaps they use more common sense.

Another important issue not addressed vigorously enough is that many, if not most, of the reading problems can be prevented through early intervention. Recall that the research of the *National Institute of Child Health* centered on an analysis of the bottom 20% with serious reading difficulties. Their conclusion was that this group lacked phonetic skills, and that identification, diagnosis and intervention must occur early (prior to grade 3) to be most effective.

An up-to-date article in *Education Week*, by Mike Schmoker, "**How to Make Reading Instruction Much, Much more Efficient,**" 11/19/2019 describes the issue:

"Third grade reading proficiency matters—enormously. It is eerily predictive of academic and career success; students who don't reach this benchmark are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time. Unfortunately, K-3 literacy instruction, on which so much depends, is often a misguided, inefficient mess. While it consumes a generous portion of the school day, it typically neglects the most vital elements of literacy. That's why our success rate, despite some progress, is still abysmal: only about half of our 3rd graders perform at grade level on their own state assessments. It is even lower for poor and minority students."

Unfortunately, state test assessments must be viewed with suspicion and caution because over two-thirds of the states have lowered their standards; they do so in order to hide the fact that reading results were so embarrassing; by lowering standards, test results look better, not that they are.

"This is both horrific and unnecessary," according to literacy researcher Richard Allington: studies show that **'virtually every student could be reading on grade level by the end of 1st grade.'**...most educators acknowledge the need for intensive, systematic phonics instruction."

Again, why doesn't it happen brings up another ignored factor.

“Decades of research has shown that explicit phonics instruction benefits early readers, but particularly those who struggle to read. What prevents us from acting on it:...failure can often be traced to the pervasiveness of small-group, ability-based instruction...The most successful K-3 teachers use small groups sparingly.”

If the author is correct, then why does small group ability instruction continue to be practiced? *“Schools of education not properly training teacher candidates in the science of reading where the research is overwhelmingly supportive of starting with phonics instruction.”* Shamefully, educators are not required to follow the research. Just imagine what would happen if doctors did not follow the research?

Implementation Barriers

The suggestions offered are practical and doable starting with *“Intensive, sustained, systematic phonics.”* except for one major and critical problem that is not mentioned. How do you require all school systems in a given state to do it—the *Science of Reading*? You simply can’t write an article with a solution but then miss out on how and whether it can be implemented on a scalable level. This is where so many fine articles and ideas *“die on the vine”* because they must be scalable--able to and required to be done in the vast majority of schools.

As a reminder, education is a function of the states. Therefore, every state has a state department of education (SDE) to provide regulations, assistance and resources for the local school districts and to ensure that the school laws passed by the legislature are followed. The SDE should require, through legislation when necessary, what must be done to correct longstanding reading deficits that currently are simply passed along to the next grade each year rather than getting “remediated.”

Therefore, the SDE must see to it that since this is the most important of all skills for learning, all districts should be required to implement the program if they truly want to equalize education for all particularly minorities. If they do not do it, a judge will do it and, in fact, judges have just required that literacy must be taught at the state level in California and at the district level in Detroit costing both millions more of taxpayer dollars for their failure to teach literacy when they had at least 9 years to do so.

Perhaps the states and districts prefer this to happen rather than make the difficult but necessary decisions to benefit all students; they prefer to have the judges or legislators do it so that they do not seem like the “bad guys” asking for more resources (dollars) that they can’t get locally or at the state level. It’s the *“blame the judges, not us—the Pontius Pilate syndrome.”* However, it will still take years to resolve this issue in the courts because of appeals while more disposable reading victims will be unloaded into the current reading landfills littering too many districts or end up very predictably behind prison walls. **YET, NO ONE, ABSOLUTELY NO ONE, IS HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR THIS TRAGEDY.**

The reason no one is held accountable is because there are no consequences or penalties for educational miseducation or malpractice. Whether the SDE has the authority to implement such actions does not seem to have been tried or tested. This is why reading is in a quagmire resulting in vastly uneven grade level performance. Therefore, I developed a legislative proposal entitled the *Reading Renaissance Act* (Part 1) that would provide for financial consequences and penalties to force schools to remediate reading failures, as well as, finally ending the problem of failing schools once and for all. Furthermore, compliance will be assured because it provides an Office of Inspector General.

Of course waiting for legislative action will probably be a lengthy process if it takes place at all. Yet, students cannot continue to be held in reading bondage while too many districts are failing in this absolutely critical responsibility because they are allowed to “do their own thing” when it comes to dealing with students below grade level. It’s absolutely imperative that one consistent reading system based on sound research, the *Science of Reading*, must be required for all districts to follow in order to remediate the vast numbers of students, particularly boys who are below grade level.

Pending any legislative action, the SDE can and must take action to stem the tide of reading failures and remediate those below grade level; incidentally, it can be done at the district level by school board action. At the elementary level, it is relatively easy to do; it is more difficult at the secondary level. However, the effort must be statewide and not district by district.

The following proposal is suggested for the SDE to implement.

Proposed SDE Reading Requirement

All schools will implement the Science of Reading curriculum to teach and remediate students below reading grade level with a minimum of 2 classroom hours (45 minutes or more) daily until grade level is reached. Schools may provide more than the daily minimum if they choose to do so; further there will be no penalties if other required curriculum must be suspended.

Students who are still below grade level at the end of the year will be required to attend a 6-8 week summer program of reading remediation consisting of 3 classroom hours per day for a minimum of 6 weeks or more. This will be at district expense.

Those students who then reach grade level will be exempt from the daily mandate that would have been required beginning in grade 4.

Each district will certify that every teacher has been trained in the Science of Reading and that each one has shown that they are able to do it successfully. "Success" will be determined by having 80% at grade level as measured by a standardized reading test.

Those teachers not certified in the SOR or have shown a lack of success in teaching it, will be offered training by the state colleges at their expense every summer. However, if the campus is located more than a 30-minute drive, the college will provide off campus locations that could include a location in a large district; but if such should occur, the district would have to open up spaces for teachers from outside the system. Of course, any district can offer its own training at its own expense providing it follows the SDE regulations; districts can also partner with other districts, or use the services of a collaborative.

There would be no cost to the teachers if they pass the required course successfully. Success will be determined by the instructor who will be provided with guidelines to follow by the SDE. A teacher who fails the course will not be allowed to teach reading until they are certified. A teacher who becomes certified, but is ineffective in teaching the science of reading will be required to retake the course at their own expense; failure will limit their ability to teach reading.

Those students not at grade level after grade 6 who are not in special education will be required to have a forensic medical and mental health examination to determine if either or both are a cause for their inability to reach grade level. Of course if either or both are involved appropriate treatment, medically and/or psychologically, will be required.

Those students in grades 9-11, because of their age, should have their remedial reading instruction take place in a more conducive environment such as a reading laboratory with cubicles and computers; the software should include self-paced and self-correcting programs. The time spent in the reading lab should be designed according to the grade level deficit; the more the grade level deficit, the more time should be spent in the reading lab.

An option for students who are not at grade level by grade 3 is to consider a special education referral that would then provide a team assessment to determine if there are special needs involved that prevent reading success; if so, then an individualized plan would be developed and implemented.

If a district chooses this option, it will be required to document the process followed for each student to the SDE department of special education or equivalent. In addition, if a parent

objects to the process, they can appeal to the SDE to consider an exemption or modification of the plan because of mitigating circumstances.

Since every problem or need cannot be anticipated because of special circumstances or needs, the district can appeal to the SDE for modifications.

At the end of each year, the superintendent will sign a notarized affidavit attesting to the fact that the district schools are following the SDE guidelines.

Research

“An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction” provides the necessary information needed to improve reading results. All of this research information is readily available and costs nothing to acquire. Putting together a task force to develop and implement the effort would be a practical way to start.

*“It is evidence from the accumulation of research on reading acquisition and instruction that has been conducted using gold-standard methodologies and has identified effective practice. Simply put, the Science of Reading is not an opinion, nor is it a philosophical belief. The accumulated **Science of Reading** evidence should be trusted to inform the why, what, and how of reading instruction.”*

There are certain assumptions that can be made because of many surveys and studies. *EdWeek* has put together an outstanding report “**Getting Reading Right**,” 12/2019, with eight informative sections. Section one, “**How Reading is Really Being Taught**” makes an extraordinary statement: “**The findings—among the first to look at teacher and teacher-educator knowledge and practices in early reading across the country—tell an illuminating story.** With the decades involved researching reading, this is among the first to compare the teachers with those who teach them—teacher educators. You would think that such a study would have been done decades ago because how teachers are taught in schools of education certainly has (should have) an impact on their classroom reading instruction.

The findings conclude that that such is not the case! Of the almost 600 teachers surveyed only 5% indicated that what they know about reading came from preservice (college) training. In other words, 95% teacher education programs are not training teacher candidates about the most important skill to be taught; worse yet, it means that the SDE’s are sanctioning their state colleges and others NOT to teach reading? Absolutely incredible! Clearly, teachers are not to blame, policymakers certainly are!

Where else did they learn about reading? Personal experience (17%), school provided (15%), own research (8%) other teachers and mentors (7%) and other (15%). In other words, teachers and individual schools have to take on the responsibility for acquiring the methods to teach reading. What an incredible waste of time and money; in the end, it then consists of a hodgepodge of throwing reading strategies at a dart board to see what sticks; obviously, not too much. It’s likely that most darts never even connected with the dart board.

It shows up when they were asked about their philosophy of reading: 68% said “balance” (there is no real definition except “hodgepodge” but interestingly, it almost matches the percentage of professors who teach “balance” (60%); only 22% picked systematic phonics which the research clearly indicates is the most effective; worse yet, they only spend between 20-30 minutes a day to do it. Is it any wonder why the reading war continues impacting boys, particularly black boys.?

**WHAT CAN BE MORE CLEAR,
DEVASTATING, DISCRIMINATORY AND
UTTERLY SHAMEFUL?**

Another recent article appeared *EdWeek*, 12/15/2019, “**Black Boys in Crisis: They Aren’t Reading,**” confirms the title:

“Literacy is the foundation for all other learning endeavors...Only 53% of children 3 to 5 are read to every day by a family member...the importance of parental influence in reading extends beyond the youngest grades. The U.S. Department of Education reports that fourth-grade classrooms with low parental involvement have students with average reading scores that are 46 points below the national average...

*Since parents, grandparents, and siblings are the default role models most of the time during that vital 0 to 5 age group, **the responsibility to instill early literacy falls on families.**”*

Now double-speak with forked tongue appears to contradict what was just stated.

*“The achievement gap between the two races is startling...it is the boys...a brother and sister from the same household could have vastly different literacy levels, even if they come from the same environment and are read to the same amount of time (even if that amount of time is none). **That difference - that gap in literacy achievement - shouldn’t fall on parents. That’s the fault of our schools.** Literacy learning is tailored to girls. So how do we adapt it to better reach our boys - particularly our young men of color?”*

WOW, they got it right! **What is also being said without words is that poverty, housing discrimination, nutrition, etc. are not causes of boys—black boys—failing, because the girls are basically untouched by the same economic and societal conditions.** But no one seems to want to say this even though evidence is readily available to indicate it.

However, the reality is that it will be “*The endless, rocky path to reading science,*” (Chester Finn). *Fordham Institute, 01/29/2020 that provides a more sobering mindset.*

*“Jeanne Chall published **Learning to Read: The Great Debate**, which should have put an end, then and forever, to arguments over ‘phonics versus ‘whole language’ and which foreshadowed the definitive **2000 report of the National Reading Panel**, which spelled out the elements of what today is commonly referred to as ‘scientific reading instruction.’ For the vast majority of children starting to learn to read, the Panel made clear (as Chall had done **thirty-three years earlier**) that the best instructional approach includes:*

- * Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness.
- * Systematic phonics instruction.
- * Vocabulary instruction.
- * Methods to improve fluency.
- * Ways to enhance comprehension.

*Thus it feels like a no-brainer to lodge scientific reading instruction at the center of what elementary teachers are being prepared to do. Getting their young charges to be fluent readers with good comprehension is their foremost instructional responsibility. Period. Yet when *Education Week* **surveyed 530 professors in late 2019** who teach early-reading courses, the majority of them, 57%, turn out to ascribe what’s known as a ‘balanced literacy philosophy’ while barely one in five ‘said their philosophy of teaching early reading centered on explicit, systematic phonics’”*

“Balanced literacy” sounds great, of course—sort of like “balanced diet” or “balanced budget”—but in fact, it balances a multitude of good and not-so-good things and most of the time does not emphasize—or even include—the first two bullets above, which is to say it slights the core of scientific reading instruction.

However, the hard part about reading instruction is successful implementation; imply putting a new curriculum in a teacher’s hand by itself won’t get the job done.

The teacher needs support in order to teach it well. Teachers also need time to learn how to communicate the material effectively to students, and students need time to develop academically while learning it. But “time” is not a welcomed word in education.

Evaluation Shambles!

We know what works for effective reading instruction to occur; the research evidence is scientific and overwhelming. So where does it all break down resulting in continued disastrous reading results for boys and in mostly failing, urban schools?

What has been left out of all the debate about reading is the entire evaluation process that is a sham despite laws and regulations and ample evidence that it is a failure to date. If there is no effective evaluation of the performance of the school board, superintendent, principals and teachers, there can be no accountability; and there can be no accountability unless there are meaningful consequences. Furthermore, how can effective evaluations occur to determine reading progress if those doing the evaluation have no clue about the *Reading Wars*? It's articulated in “***Proven Programs Eliminate Gaps in Reading Achievement?***” *Robert Slavin's Blog*, 04/25/2019:

“Today we have many solutions to the problems of struggling readers, solutions so effective that if widely and effectively implemented, they could substantially change not only the reading skills, but the life chances of students who are struggling in reading.”

*This week, my colleagues and I released a review of research on programs for struggling readers. Our review examined thousands of studies of programs intended to improve the reading performance of struggling readers. We found 59 studies of 39 different programs that met very high standards of research quality. 73% of the qualifying studies used random assignment to experimental or control groups, just as the most rigorous medical studies do. But the inescapable conclusion from our review is that **the gaps can be closed, using proven models that already exist...news that demands big changes.**”*

But do the school boards, the superintendents, and principals who evaluate the teachers know anything about the reading debate? A survey of the regulations of 51 state educational agencies (the 50 states and the District of Columbia) was conducted to see what, if any, knowledge of the science of reading is required for licensure as an administrator in each state. The results were as disappointing as they were revealing. Currently, no state agency requires that individuals seeking administrator licensure demonstrate knowledge of the science of reading.

Therefore, a needed change is the education of school principals discussed in “***Why aren't administrators required to know more about reading development?***” (Lovette & Kenni), *Ed Week*, 12/16/2019:

“The 2019 NAEP results confirms a decades-long literacy crisis: In response, education and mainstream media have focused on gaps in teachers' knowledge of the settled science of reading development, as well as the widespread implementation of popular but disproven and ineffectual instructional approaches for teaching reading.”

Obviously, one reason for this problem is that the estimated 90,000 principals and 15,000 superintendents are in the dark about this entire reading debate, yet they make decisions that significantly affect the quality of the instructional programs delivered in their schools. Also, almost all public school principals report having major input in evaluating current teachers (95%) [there was nothing to indicate “how” and “when” they evaluate], hiring new ones (87%), and more than two-thirds report determining the content of the professional development provided within their schools (68%). Based on reading test results, the professional development content does not seem to include the *Science of Reading* or it's simply discarded.

Is it that there is no information about the evaluation breakdown? Far from it, there is plenty of information available; whether it is used, seems doubtful. For example, there is an

excellent document from the American Association of School Administrators, *Evaluating the Superintendent, 2010* (39 pages):

*“The standards and accountability era initiated a trend to link superintendent performance to student achievement and other measurable student performance standards. This shift created a great emphasis on the instructional leadership skills of superintendents, heretofore generally the responsibility of other specialists in school districts. **In essence, the performance expectations for most superintendents changed quickly, without a corresponding change in their official job descriptions or in the processes used to evaluate their performance.** This shift to the focus on the quality of superintendents’ instructional leadership created a set of unique challenges, not only for superintendents, but also for the boards that evaluate their performance.*

*The need to effectively evaluate the superintendents of schools annually is not only a fundamental responsibility of the boards that employ them, but it is also legally required in most states. **Yet, until recently, superintendent performance evaluation has too frequently been neglected.** In 1980, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Board Association (NSBA) issued a joint statement calling for formal evaluations of superintendents (AASA, 1980), yet in the intervening years, little systemic progress was made.*

***In today’s political environment, the hue and cry for accountability at all levels demand the fair evaluation of all personnel.** Achieving a fair evaluation of the superintendent will require greater compatibility among evaluation instruments, actual duties of the superintendent.”*

Most interestingly, in reviewing the Performance Domains listed for 12 states, not a single domain had to do with principal evaluations; it’s possible that such is included in *Instructional Leadership* domain, but it’s absence suggests that it is not a priority.

The National Association of Elementary Principals published, *Rethinking Principal Evaluation* (not dated but references indicate it was done after 2012)—25 pages; it’s a very thoughtful report.

*“The research to date on principal evaluation also suggests that many state and district evaluations do not reflect existing principal standards or proven practices, and many principal evaluation instruments are neither technically sound nor useful for improving principal performance—despite the proven importance of the principal to school and student success. **An even greater concern is that many principals are never formally evaluated in any meaningful way.** As a default, many states and districts are beginning to use student test scores as a way of evaluating principals. But these measures taken alone can seriously distort realities and are woefully insufficient for providing principals and assistant principals the information they need to improve their work and their schools. **States and districts are encouraged to avoid an over-reliance on standardized test assessments of student achievement in favor of multiple measures designed to encompass the entirety of a student’s learning experience...***

But until now, no inclusive, research-driven framework on effective principal evaluation has been informed directly by practicing principals. The framework design presented in this document provides areas for consideration in developing principal evaluations that recognize the ultimate aim of such evaluations is to enhance individual principal leadership development leading to school improvement and enhanced student achievement.”

However, as of 2012, CT was one of only 14 states that has adopted an evaluation system for teachers and principals tied to student achievement, and it was the result of a Performance Evaluation Advisory Council initiative in 2010:

*“**Evaluations for teachers** will include: 45 percent tied to student advancement with one-half of that based on results of standardized tests; 40 percent reflecting*

observations of performance and practice; 10 percent to peer or parent feedback surveys and 5 percent to student feedback or the whole-school achievement.

***Principals' evaluations** also will use the 45 percent standard tied to student achievement with one-half reflecting standardized tests and the other half determined locally; 40 percent to observations of performance; 5 percent to teacher effectiveness outcomes and the rest to staff, community, and/or student feedback surveys.*

Specific guidelines on evaluations will now be developed for a 4-level rating system: exemplary, proficient, developing and below standard and the system is expected to be in place by July 2013.

But in 2014, the statute was amended with a “*flexibility option*,” essentially, it watered down the evaluation process obviously within a short time of passage of the first statute meaning that there was instant and powerful negative reactions from the unions that resulted in “flexibility.”

Considering that Connecticut has had the highest achievement gap [in the U.S.] between its low-income and minority students with their mainly suburban counterparts, it took a federal school reform law, *No Child Left Behind Act*, to instigate an effort to improve evaluations.

Up until this time, despite the achievement gap distinction, evaluations were impotent. Yet, CT has one of the highest levels of education, of its population, pays one of the highest teacher salaries, an average class size of 13; if it were not for the law and. it would have remained as words and little action.

Considering the time and effort put into the new evaluation system that has had 6 years of use, there is no publicity concerning how effective it has been. If there was impressive results, the state would have reported such in blazing headlines; silence suggests that nothing has really changed.

Going to the opposite end of the U.S., *California does not require annual evaluations for all principals...It does not require observations/site visits, and it does not include any training requirements in state policy.*

A 2001 report, “***Principal Evaluation Policies in California***,” resulting from The Integrated Leadership Development Initiative, addressed the problem.

“By nearly all accounts, the manner in which teacher and principal performance is assessed is near the brink of reform. Yet, while there is substantial agreement that the status quo is sub-par, there is also clear political conflict among major stakeholders about how to proceed.”

But the newly elected State Superintendent described it somewhat differently: “[*our*] evaluation system is in something of a shambles.”

However, an agreement has been reached for “***A New Evaluation System for Los Angeles Principals***,” (Jaclyn Zubrzycki) *Ed Week*, 09/12/2012, “*and for the first time, student test scores will be a factor.*”

The use of test scores in the evaluation process has been a real bone of contention with the unions and, in my opinion, rightly so unless the test data is analyzed based on the composition of the students in the classroom e.g. if the girls are doing well, but not the boys can the teacher be blamed? If there are an inordinate number of special education students, scores will be low as expected.

However, if there is pretesting when students start in the classroom matched against post testing to determine the amount of student growth, that would be a wise way to use the tests but that is not what's being done; in other words, student growth should be an evaluation factor not just a score.

School Boards

Of course typically, no one evaluates the school board; the only evaluations are self-administered. One excellent evaluation tool is from the New York State School Boards Association, *School Board Evaluation*. It is very detailed and should be easy to use. There are also several other resources to conduct self-evaluations, and such evaluations do not necessarily mean that they lead to improved performance. In fact, there is not evidence as to the effectiveness of self-evaluations.

An evaluation of 187 boards by the Miles Group (*a consulting and advisory firm*) “suggests that many board evaluations are inadequate.... we found that most board evaluations fail to identify and correct poor performance among individual members. But it’s just not school boards that are at fault, so are corporate boards. Self-evaluation is hard to conduct because it is like looking into a mirror and diagnosing your strengths and weaknesses –something very difficult to do.

What’s needed is required training for board members so that they know what to do and how to do it

“We cannot expect those with minimal knowledge to effectively lead the overhaul in reading [or any other needed improvements] that is long overdue, nor can we expect teachers [and other staff] alone to transform deeply rooted beliefs and widespread, ineffective practices”[far too common in education].

School systems are complex human organizations and if anything can go wrong it does, and it’s really hard to blame anyone—it’s the system at fault and humans have to operate in a very fragile system that tries to be all things to all people—it has not been done, and cannot be done.

This cacophony of just the reading issue can be duplicated time and time again with every operating function of the school system. Perhaps the real issue is whether boards are obsolete, and even the school system itself. Consider the fact that the one room schools operated successfully without all of the structures and systems needed (or wanted) in today’s schools. Private schools, in general, tend to be more successful than public schools. Parochial schools also tend to be more successful. Of course there are good reasons why they tend to be more effective with instruction and learning since (1) they have their own philosophy (2) their school populations are more homogeneous and (3) they do not have to respond to every hiccup by the public.

Charters are another example with many of them operated independently. Perhaps it may be time to simply give all parents an equivalent amount of dollars to use in any school, public, private, parochial, independent and even non-profit. **In fact this issue has been studied not just in the U.S. but in developed countries as well; our neighbors to the north, Canada, is also exploring this issue.:**

In a Chat format, Ed. Week (2009) conducted a discussion, *Are Local School Boards Obsolete?* The discussion revolved around whether boards “*Are t an essential part of the American system of K-12 education?*” What surfaced as a issue was the fact that “*As states and the federal government have come to play a larger role in education policymaking, boards have seen their roles change.*” In essence, their roles have become far more complex and confusing and that is putting it mildly.

An essay predicts that school boards will be obsolete by 2025 and it lists a number of reasons to support the prediction among which is:

- School boards overall might not be needed or equipped to provide a 21st century education.
- School boards, like an old car past its prime, need attention and that the status quo will not suffice for those who want improved student outcomes.

- Teachers, due to collective bargaining, have assumed many of the prerogatives that school boards one reserved for themselves.
- New governance models threaten to make school boards in some locales obsolete; financial pressures leave school boards less and less leeway in their spending decision.

This topic will be discussed in far more detail in a future column.

In the meantime, there is something that can be done to have more effective school board accountability; it would be easy to do, and cost nothing to do. The only way to monitor school board practices and policies is to have an independent, volunteer and **trained** citizen audit committee; it is something I have advocated for over 30 years. This will be a future column as well. My experience in conducting numerous workshops to advocate for such committees certainly indicates that they are bitterly opposed to have such oversight and that's putting it nicely.

In summary, the reading debacle is only one of many issues that need attention in education; and despite tons of research, and many successful models to emulate, the reading crisis is still just that—a perplexing and unsolved crisis with rhetoric that goes into the black hole of space without any results.

Is there a way out? Next week: Part 4, Lawsuit Deliverance!