

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

What Every Teacher of Reading Should Know or How to Solve America's Literacy Problem in Short Order

The prevalent view among educators these days is that teaching someone to read is an exceedingly difficult and complex undertaking and that, for the student, learning to read is equally difficult, fraught with pitfalls, complexities, frustrations, and tedium. Of course, the educators would be the last to admit that it is they who have made the teaching of reading the onerous task it has become. They would be the last to admit that the teaching of reading can be, and actually is, not at all difficult, or tedious, or complex, when it is done in the proper manner.

What is the proper manner? Simply stated, it is any program that teaches our alphabetic system in a logical, systematic, intensive way. Such methods were in use in ancient Rome, in colonial America, and in the first one hundred years or so of this republic's history.

Then, in the early 1930s, the professors of education decided to change the way reading is taught in American schools. They chose a new method — look-say — which

teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. The result is that the teaching of reading has been made so illogical, so difficult, so complicated that millions of young Americans emerge from 12 years of formal education as functional illiterates — that is, able to read at about a 5th grade level at best.

Back in 1972, when I was writing *The New Illiterates*, I did a line-by-line analysis of the Dick and Jane reading program. I was amazed at the complexity and illogicality of its methodology and came to the conclusion that a child taught to read by this convoluted teaching method could easily develop the symptoms of dyslexia. Simply studying the method made me sick and angry. I could not understand how intelligent "educators" could concoct a reading program so basically contrary to the workings of the human mind.

I decided to prove that all of that insane complexity was totally unnecessary and that a child or adult could be taught to read in a much simpler, easier, faster, and more effec-

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tive way. Of course, it had to be a phonics program, for our writing system is an alphabetic one in which letters stand for sounds. But what kind of a phonics program?

The Better Way

I analyzed our English alphabetic system. We have an alphabet of 26 letters and a language of 44 sounds. We have about 20 vowel sounds in English but only 6 vowel letters, and we use many ways to spell the same sound. What was needed was a logical, systematic approach in which the letter sounds were taught with intensive drill in a sequence that made sense — that is, beginning with the simplest spelling forms and gradually working into the more complex forms.

To me, that seemed to be the most logical way to do it. The textbooks on reading pedagogy written by the professors of reading insisted that English is “not phonetic” and that phonics doesn’t work, and that children had to memorize sight words, with the help of lots of pictures, and read them in context and use a variety of “strategies” — including guessing — to derive “meaning” from print. I was determined to prove that all of those reading “experts” with their degrees were all wet and didn’t know what they were talking about.

I also decided that pictures were not needed in teaching children a sound-symbol system. The letters stood for sounds, not apples, or bees, or elephants. Besides, pictures were a distraction and encouraged children to seek meaning in the pictures rather than in the text. The result was the phonics reading program I created for my book, *How to Tutor*. Although I had tested the program with a few individuals, my tutoring experience then was nowhere as extensive as it is today. So I had to rely on the parents who used the book to find out how

well the reading program worked. And, contrary to what all of the “experts” had written, it turned out to work very well.

A Parent’s Testimony

Indeed, in January 1978, I received the following letter from a father in New Jersey who had used the book with his son:

Dear Mr. Blumenfeld:

This letter is being written to you only after several weeks of doubt as to whether or not I should impose upon your time. Regardless, I just must write to express my wife’s and my thanks for your excellent book, *How to Tutor*. It has been so very valuable to us in teaching our 8 1/2 year-old son, Eric, to read, write, and do arithmetic.

Eric is evidently a very intelligent boy. This was obvious to others than the immediate family. However, before he was half-way through the first grade, we were beginning to wonder about the methods being used in public schools in Westfield. [My wife] started working in our boy’s school as a volunteer worker. By the time he was in the second grade, we were worried at the retardation process — not only on our son, but on our friends’ sons and daughters.

We went to our public library. We found Mr. Rudolf Flesch’s book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*; *Reading: Chaos and Cure*; and *Better Late Than Early*; and your *How to Tutor*.

You’ve no doubt had hundreds of parents tell you how wonderful it is to be so desperate and then find such “gems” as the above books.

We both read the above books in the order listed. This means that we clearly saw the problem, but didn’t know what to do about it. Then we read your book — or rather I did — and then told [my wife] that your book’s presentation was EXACTLY the way to get Eric straightened out! . . .

[I]n September, I started tutoring our son. I set up two school desks and a blackboard in our basement. We start at nine a.m. sharp each school day. We have three periods of 50 minutes to an hour, with twenty-minute recesses in between. Thus, we are through by 12:30 or 1 p.m.

Not being an educator, nor even having an education beyond the twelfth grade (although I did have a wonderful elementary schooling in San Diego, California — and attended night school and educated myself after high school), I knew I must follow your

book's instructions EXACTLY, which I have been doing.

Even you wouldn't believe the results! It was as if we were witnessing a miracle!

When I started on September 10th, Eric was almost totally retarded as to reading. Evidently he was one of those youngsters who refused to attempt sight reading. He just turned "see-and-say" off entirely.

Anyhow, would you believe that we went from Lesson 2 through Lesson 27 in two weeks? And by Thanksgiving time we had drilled right through Lesson 117.

Eric is now reading Robinson Crusoe, and is just loving it! He had been having headaches all through the second grade, and was losing weight.

Since he started learning by your method, he hasn't been sick one day, and has gained weight rapidly to where he has a perfect physique! Needless to say, we are so grateful,

Naturally, I plan to continue with the tutoring right through to June. We think he should be with his peers, but at the same time are worried about public schooling (retardation).

Therefore, we are having the people who obtain out-of-print books for us — search for one copy each of your *How To Start Your Own Private School* and *The New Illiterates*. . . .

Thank you so much, Mr. Blumenfeld, for your excellent effort in helping countless parents, such as ourselves, in warding off the educational crippling of countless children!

Very gratefully yours,

William McDowell

My Assumptions Were Correct

That letter confirmed what I believed to be true: that children can be taught to read in a straightforward, logical and systematic way, without gimmicks, Mickey Mouse, toys and games, singing and dancing. Since children teach themselves to speak their own language without the retarding paraphernalia that usually accompanies reading instruction in America, I assumed, correctly, that they didn't need it if taught to read in the proper alphabetic manner.

As a tutor, I also found that I needed a large-print book that could be used directly in the tutoring situation. And so I took the

reading program in *How to Tutor* and expanded it into *Alpha-Phonics: A Primer for Beginning Readers*. The latter was first published in 1983 and it is presently being used by thousands of parents, tutors and teachers.

Does it work? I think that after you read the following letter from a mother in Massachusetts, dated July 28, 1990, you'll conclude that it works very well indeed:

Dear Mr. Blumenfeld:

I met you at the Mass H.O.P.E. [Homeschooler's Organization of Parent Educators] Convention, April 6-7, 1990. At the time I had spent the year looking through four or five different phonics programs for my soon-to-be kindergartner. I was planning on spending upwards of \$200. Initially I was planning on purchasing the . . . program. It had a lot of fun activities in it, and was well-laid out, but I was concerned that the first semester seemed to be mostly concentrating on sight-words. Then I started looking into the . . . Program (my older son had used this in a Christian school and had done extremely well.) But when I looked at the Phonics Manual at the convention, I was not convinced this was the system to use either. When I spoke with you, you mentioned that I would not find an easier, more logical, step-by-step approach to phonics than *Alpha-Phonics*. For the price involved, (\$21.95) I figured it wouldn't hurt to try it out.

I must admit when I first looked at the teacher's instructions in the back, and the student pages in the front that I was a little skeptical. There were no frills, and it looked too simple. You stated that kids don't need all those pictures, it just takes away from real learning. We found out the truth of your words just a short time later, and realize now that if a child wants to learn, the fluff is really not necessary, and sometimes distracts from your main purpose and thrust — which is learning to read. What we covered in a month, most programs take two years to get through. What a waste of my precious son's time.

I was planning on using *Alpha-Phonics* with Jordan, one lesson-per-day for kindergarten this fall. But Jordan had other ideas! He started memorizing the way words looked on signs, and I realized he was ready to learn to read immediately. I did not want him to develop any bad reading habits, so we quickly pulled out the *Alpha-Phonics* manual we had purchased at the Convention. He had such a desire to learn! In one month we had covered the whole book! And my son went from reading signs to reading books my older son had started reading in 2nd grade

last fall! It was so easy! We never spent more than 10 minutes at one time, although some days we would have two sessions. We generally covered about 3-5 pages each lesson.

I particularly liked the systematic way you worked with one vowel at a time and used all the possible combinations before moving on to the next, and the same with the long vowel sounds.

Because he is reading so well, and he is already ahead in his math and handwriting skills, we decided to skip kindergarten this year and move him up to 1st grade materials. (I am homeschooling so we go at our own pace.)

His Sunday School teachers, relatives and friends marvel that he can read so well already, and when I mention to teachers that I only worked with him a month, they can hardly believe it. The American mind-set is so ingrained with the false concepts that reading is a laborious process that takes years to achieve. *Alpha-Phonics* certainly dispels that myth! He didn't need "reading readiness," he didn't even need fun and games, he just needed a basic, step-by-step, intensive phonics program.

Thank you for making such a fine and inexpensive phonics program available to the general public.

By the way, our son had just had his fifth birthday in March, so he was a young five-year old as we began this program. My other son also learned to read in school right after his 5th birthday. Psychologists tell us that boys do not mature as fast as girls in this area. So much for the concept, "better late than early."

Sincerely,
Teresa A. Ambra

P.S. Thanks for saving us about one-hundred and eighty bucks!

Convinced?

If you're a public-school teacher, reading about intensive, systematic phonics for the first time, you may be in a state of shock. No, Mrs. Ambra was not paid to write that letter. It came in the mail, totally unexpected. But if you need further convincing evidence, here's a letter from a father in Jacksonville, Florida, dated May 7, 1990:

Dear Sam:

About three years ago, after hearing you interviewed by Marlin Maddoux on "Point of View" radio, I ordered your books, *Alpha-Phonics* and *How to*

Tutor. At that time, neither of my two children had begun school and I was determined to make sure they would be taught the single most important learning skill — i.e., reading — correctly.

To say *Alpha-Phonics* works is an understatement! My daughter consistently tests 3 to 4 years ahead of her age level — which, with the dumbed-down curriculum standards of most public schools probably means she is right where she ought to be.

Her success in reading has given her a poise and confidence in other subject areas and she has maintained a nearly straight "A" average in all subject areas. After two years of this, she expects to do well and this positive attitude has encouraged her teachers to stimulate her learning experience so she won't get bored.

I have no doubt that had she been exposed to the traditional look-say instruction that she would have learned to read. But it would have been at a lower level and with more difficulty. With superior reading skills new words do not frustrate but challenge her. She has confidence and that affects her approach to the rest of her schooling.

Even more remarkable to me than my daughter's success is that of my four-year-old son. As you know, boys are usually one year behind girls in their cognitive development. However, watching his sister's success at reading, he decided on his own that it was time for him to learn how to read. He is learning very well indeed, although at a somewhat slower pace than his older sister.

This brings me to another benefit that I as a parent-tutor appreciate about *Alpha-Phonics*. The layout, organization and efficiency of your method makes every minute count. Since 4-5 year olds usually only have about a 20-minute attention span at best, this is critical when trying to teach them anything.

I'm writing out of appreciation for your giving a concerned parent something to empower him to make a difference in the lives of his children. I think most parents want to do this but are frustrated because they don't know how. Thank you for showing me how.

In case you wish to use any of my letter in any of your promotional literature, please feel free to include my name and address. I will gladly vouch for *Alpha-Phonics'* effectiveness. So will my children's report cards.

Sincerely,
Tim McCaulley
7051 King Arthur Rd.
Jacksonville, FL 32211

Obviously, if the reading teachers of

America decided to use *Alpha-Phonics* in their classrooms instead of the present instruction programs that are causing massive failure, we could solve America's reading problem in short order. But how to reach them with this message? There must be a way.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Send copies of this newsletter to the public-school teachers, administrators and principals you may personally know, or not know. Attach a note, saying: "If you are interested in solving America's literacy crisis, please read the enclosed newsletter."

2. Send copies of this newsletter with the same note to business people and corporate executives in your area. Many of their companies have literacy programs which may or may not be using effective instruction materials.

3. Send copies of this newsletter to mayors, legislators, school board members, governors, Congressmen, and others in city, state and federal governments who should know that a cure for America's literacy problem exists, a cure much less expensive than what it costs to produce functional illiteracy in the first place.

4. Send copies of this newsletter to people in the media: editors, columnists, reporters, radio and TV talk show hosts, etc., with the suggestion that they follow up on the information therein.

5. Send copies of this newsletter to parents you may know whose children are having reading problems in school. It may help them save their children from lifetime frustration as functional illiterates.

Meanwhile, we shall be doing all we can to reach the public.

Milwaukee's Choice Program Faces Court Fight

Supt. Robert S. Peterkin spent the first

day of class visiting some of Milwaukee's most troubled neighborhood schools as a sign of his personal commitment to reform. But that message came too late for the parents of 391 low-income Milwaukee students, who have voted with their feet by pulling their children out of the public schools and sending them to nonsectarian private schools at state expense.

The experimental program which provides public dollars to give families a choice among private schools, is the first of its kind in the country. Already, it has sparked a legal battle that is being closely watched nationwide. Opponents of the law claim that it could lead to a dismantling of the public school system and to a resurgence of racial segregation.

But supporters assert that choice will give parents the opportunity to pursue the best education for their children while pressuring the public schools to improve.

Legal Battle Continues

Last month, a Wisconsin Judge ruled that the program was legal, because the state constitution "does not expressly require that public expenditures be made only for public purposes." If choice improves the quality of children's education, Dane County Circuit Court Judge Susan Steingass asserted, "benefit inures not only to a few students in Milwaukee but to our educational system as a whole."

The fate of the program now rests with the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, which is expected to rule this fall. The Milwaukee Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a coalition of public-education groups have challenged the law as unconstitutional.

Meanwhile, the parents of participating youngsters held out high hopes for the program as schools began the new year. Despite the controversy surrounding the legislation,

most of those interviewed said they chose the private schools for traditional reasons: smaller class sizes, more individual attention, better discipline, and heightened parental involvement.

For Low-Income Students

Specifically aimed at low-income students, the Milwaukee parental-choice program requires that families have an income less than 175 percent of the federal poverty level to be eligible. In addition, no more than 49 percent of the enrollment at participating schools may be made up of students from the program. And no more than 1 percent of the Milwaukee public school population — or about 980 pupils — may participate in any given year.

A total of 635 youngsters applied to participating private schools this summer, out of approximately 55,000 eligible students. Schools were required to accept all children who applied, unless they had too few vacancies. In those instances, children were selected randomly in a lottery.

Supporters of the program attributed the low turnout among applicants to continued uncertainty about the program's future and to negative publicity. Those students who applied and were not accepted, because of space limitations, were forced to go back to the public schools

State Pays Tuition

Under the program, the state will pay about \$2,500 this year for participating children to attend one of eight private nonsectarian schools. That money, which equals the amount the state gives the school district per pupil, will be deducted from the Milwaukee public-school budget. According to the Wisconsin Department of Education, a total of 26 schools were eligible to participate in

the program. Officials at several of the schools that declined to participate cited lack of space or low tuition reimbursement as their primary reasons for not becoming involved.

These schools are a far cry from the elitist image of private schools. Many have predominantly black or Hispanic populations with strong roots in the low-income community.

The Harambee Community School — the name means "let's work together" in Swahili — is located in a former Catholic school on the predominantly black, north side of Milwaukee. The 21-year-old program was begun by neighborhood parents during the 1960's to provide children with a stronger sense of their cultural heritage, said Sister Callista Robinson, the school's principal.

The back-to-basics curriculum includes Spanish and computer science in grades 3-8. Class sizes are limited to 25 students. Of the 303 pupils in preschool through 8th grade this fall, 86 are attending the school through the choice program.

Parent Participation

"What we have to offer is parent participation," Sister Robinson said in an interview last week. "We have a school board that is comprised of parents from the school who are elected by the parent body, and who take care of policy."

The Urban Day School, a small, mostly black school founded 23 years ago by parents when their neighborhood parochial school closed, also stresses parental involvement. Of the school's 500 or so students, about 85 have enrolled through the choice program.

What the private schools offer parents, stressed Representative Polly Williams, sponsor of the choice bill, is "empowerment." "Parents are in control here," she said. "People like to be where they have

some power and authority."

For the schools themselves, the program offers a needed infusion of cash. Officials at many of the schools said it costs them approximately \$3,300 to educate a child. But they typically charge tuition rates between \$650 and \$950. The rest is made up through fund-raising efforts.

Failures of Desegregation

A report by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute last year found that, despite 12 years of desegregation efforts, the achievement of the city's black students — who make up about 55 percent of the district's enrollment — remains far below expectations. The report also charged that the district's desegregation programs have replaced racial segregation with "economic segregation," by allowing black students from middle class families to transfer to suburban schools or to specialty schools within the city, while sending students from less advantaged backgrounds to traditional neighborhood high schools.

According to Representative Williams, desegregation was "the worst thing that could have happened to our children. What they're doing is putting the race of my child ahead of the education of my child, and that's not right."

Rep. Williams maintains that the choice program provides the leverage "to force" the public schools to change. "They can longer sit around and say parents don't care," she said. "They've been getting away with that for years."

N.A.A.C.P. Opposes Choice

But Felmers O. Chaney, president of the N.A.A.C.P.-Milwaukee, says, "That's ludicrous. We have 65,000 black children in this system and the only thing that you can do is

make the system teach the children. You don't do that just by jerking out 1,000 children who may not even be minorities."

Mr. Chaney's organization is one of seven currently contesting the legality of the choice program in court. They have asked that the program be declared unconstitutional, in part because it calls for the expenditure of public money for private purposes, and because the private schools would not be held to the same standards as public ones.

Herbert J. Grover, state superintendent of public instruction and a staunch foe of the program, warned that it would result in "two systems of education: one accountable, one not accountable; both financed with public resources."

"These are essentially private, black, racially isolated schools," he complained. "What happened to Brown v. Board of Education? If we have that condition, can we have white, racially isolated schools?"

Richard W. Collins, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state's largest teachers' union, predicted that the program could "completely destroy the public school system." And Penny Manke, president of the Milwaukee Congress of Parents and Teachers, cautioned that "it's taking money away from the public schools. We would rather see parents work with the system to improve it," she said.

But, as Polly Williams has argued, "You're not going to get the public schools to make these changes by themselves." (Education Week, 9/12/90)

Attacks on Students in Los Angeles Schools Increase

The number of students attacked with deadly weapons in Los Angeles school buildings increased 36 percent during the last school year, the L.A. Unified School District

has reported.

The district recorded 379 attacks on students involving deadly weapons in 1989-90, up from 278 the previous year. The number of serious assaults on school employees decreased 11 percent, but the number of guns found on school grounds totaled 354, up 29 percent over the previous year, officials said.

The total number of attacks on all persons on campus increased, but the total number of criminal incidents decreased 16 percent.

In June, the school board approved regulations that call for the automatic expulsion of any student in the 7th grade or above who is caught with a firearm or involved in a serious assault with any weapon. Previously, most students caught with weapons were transferred to other schools. (Education Week, 9/12/90)

Schlafly Blasts New Definition of Reading

The June 1990 issue of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* has an excellent analysis of the new Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) which is calculated to hide from the public the deficiencies of the reading programs in Michigan schools. The MEAP reading test may well be the model that will be used nationally to hide rampant student illiteracy which will result from "whole language" reading programs in the nation's schools. Mrs. Schlafly writes:

What is Michigan's justification for this peculiar new "reading test"? A news release from MEAP states that it was caused by the state's having adopted in 1986 this new definition of reading: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation."

Under this ridiculous definition, it is no longer necessary for the student to understand the printed word on the page. He can just "dynamically interact" based on his prior knowledge, on whatever is "suggested" by the few words he can actually read, and on the "context," which means figuring out the story line from the illustrations on the page.

The educators pushing this type of text have dressed up their deception by calling their approach the "whole language" method. The practitioners of this jargon tell teachers at training sessions that they should focus on "students' overall understanding of the critical concepts and the ideas in a text" instead of on reading the actual words. The new-style "reading tests" are devised to accommodate the pupils' failure to read individual words.

The whole exercise is designed to conceal from the public the fact that the schools have simply given up on the primary task of teaching children to read. It's a consumer fraud and a disaster for the children who spend years in school but never learn the skill of reading, much less the joy of reading.

(For a copy of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, write Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002.)

Comment: I agree with Phyllis that the educators in Michigan are engaged in consumer fraud. But if consumer fraud is a crime, shouldn't the U.S. Department of Education be doing something about it? Why not write a letter to Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos and urge him to investigate the matter. The government only responds when there are enough complaints from taxpayers out there.

Vital Quote

Everyone carries a part of society on his shoulders; no one is relieved of his share of responsibility by others. And no one can find a safe way out for himself if society is sweeping towards destruction.

Therefore everyone, in his own interests, must thrust himself vigorously into the intellectual battle. None can stand aside with unconcern; the interests of everyone hang on the result. Whether he chooses or not, every man is drawn into the great historical struggle, the decisive battle into which our epoch has plunged us.

—Ludwig von Mises