

What is "phonics" and how is it different from "whole language"?

Phonics teaches the sounds and syllables of the English language so you can put them together like building blocks and be able to read big words. Whole language teaches (1) guessing at whole words from pictures on the page, (2) skipping over words you don't know, (3) substituting words that seem to fit (e.g., pony for horse, holiday for vacation), (4) predicting what you think the word could be based on the context of the story. In whole language, you do not learn the letters, sounds and syllables; you just look at the configuration of the whole word. Guessing, skipping, substituting and predicting are NOT reading; they are a fraud.

For more complete information, see ["Phonics vs. Whole Language"](#), PSR July 1996

Phonics vs. Whole Language

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

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

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

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

A federal agency called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) publishes what is called the Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States. Its recently released report on the 1994 test given to 140,000 students in grades 4, 8 and 12 in public and private schools proves that schoolchildren's reading skills are not only bad, but are getting worse. Comparing 1992 and 1994, the NAEP results show a significant *decline* in

the percentage of students scoring at or above the "proficient level" and at or above the "basic level," and a significant *increase* in the percentage of pupils performing below the "basic level." The NAEP tests also show a lack of any positive results from the expensive federal Title I program for the disadvantaged.

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

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

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

The typical first-grader already knows the meaning of thousands of big words, such as hamburger, basketball, birthday, toothbrush, and even hippo-potamus and Philadelphia. But the child will not be able to read those words unless he is taught the skill of sounding out the syllables. That's what we call phonics.

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

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

An Educator Discovers Phonics

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

When he left office two years ago, Honig sincerely set about to find out why public schoolchildren are not learning how to read. He started from the reasonable assumption that "the first and foremost job of elementary school is to teach children to read." His book is

just a straightforward explanation, based on voluminous research and empirical evidence, of how children can and should be taught to read.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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