APPENDIX A:
Senate Hearing Speech

Literacy Today: What is Wrong and How Can We Fix it?

Oregon Senate Hearing Presentation, February, 2001
by Wanda Sanseri

I'm holding a set of amazing, wonderworking tools. (I held up a stack of cards.) Before I finish my speech you'll understand why these simple, profound, but little known concepts work like magic.

An Undervalued Language

Most of us do not appreciate or properly value our language. We've been told English is illogical, irregular, and filled with endless exceptions. We flounder teaching spelling and reading. I have transformational news. English is NOT as perplexingly difficult as we've been led to believe. With the information in my hand, just 98 cards, you can unlock most words in our dictionary. This news is particularly amazing considering the international significance of our language.

English is the most vital language in the world, the first truly global language. Over half of the people who use English do not speak it as their mother tongue. English has the richest vocabulary on the planet. The modern Chinese dictionary has about 12,000 entries. The French vocabulary less than 100,000 words. But the Oxford English Dictionary lists 500,000 words! (McCrum, p.10)

While the world values English as a key means to personal advancement, a growing number of native English speaking people have trouble recognizing words in print. With the most highly funded educational system in the world, we assume everyone can read. We find it hard to believe that 30% of high school graduates cannot read the warning on a can of Drano ®, fill out a job application, interpret a bus schedule, or decipher the menu in a restaurant. The reports of massive illiteracy do not ring true because most of us do not think we personally know anyone with this problem. The chances are that more than one of your friends struggles with the language but tries to pretend otherwise. Non-readers in a culture such as ours do not broadcast their handicap. Victims of this subculture go to great lengths to disguise their secret.


magic in my hands

Consider John Corcoran, author of *The Teacher Who Could Not Read.* This award-winning high school instructor could not read the sign on the bathroom door to know if it said men or women. Jonathan Kozol in *Illiterate America,* describes a well-dressed draftsman who carefully places a fresh edition of *The New York Times* on his desk at work each day just to appear informed. At night he trashes the paper he cannot read. (Kozol, p. 3). Ones you least expect, the student next door, the mechanic who repairs your airplane, or the CEO at your company may be part of this invisible but growing minority.

I would have trouble comprehending the severity of the situation, if I had not witnessed epidemic academic failure in the classroom and with various highly intelligent adults who have over the years come to me secretly for help.

My Experience: Witnessing the Problem

I first became aware of the literacy problem as a high school English teacher in the early 1970s. I taught in three distinct settings: an inner-city all-black school, a small farming community, and a settled middle class suburb. Low skill levels in all three locations made my job of teaching literature, grammar, and upper-level composition close to impossible.

One year I was assigned a high school remedial class. The students had high intelligence (an IQ of at least 120 or above) but had major problems with spelling and reading. They came from intact, middle-class families and had involved, concerned parents. My budget for supplies exceeded my needs. The principal begged me to buy supplies. If I didn't spend all the money allowed, the school would lose funds the next year. Our best and brightest struggled with the most foundational academic skills. I realized that the blame could not be placed on the students, their parents, or the supposed lack of money spent on education. I began to suspect a problem with the teaching methods themselves.

I did not fault individual teachers. I belonged to the ranks. Some of the most caring people I know go into teaching. People, however, can be sincere and still be wrong. I started investigating ways to correct the problem. A friend told me about phonics. I did not know what that meant. She showed me that letters represented sounds of speech. The letter A said /a/ in *apple*. I couldn't believe her. I had never heard this in my life. She gave me a recording so I could practice hearing and saying the short vowel sounds. I would listen to the recording at night and then teach the sounds to my class the next day. I understood how handicapped I had been because of whole language instruction. Nothing can measure the unnecessary stress and limitations I had needlessly endured. I developed a passion to learn what I had missed so I could give others a better start in life.

Sincere teachers can be wrong!

My Experience: Victory over the Problem

That was over thirty years ago. Since that time I have experienced success teaching all learning types, various ages, and in different settings. Classroom teachers trained by me have reported amazing progress, as have tutors and home educators. I have not only witnessed success with average and above average students, but also with ones others termed unteachable. I guided a dedicated mother of a highly retarded daughter. The Downs Syndrome girl can now spell at the twelfth grade level! I tutored an illiterate mother with two juvenile delinquent sons. In five hours of instruction, she jumped two-and-a-half grade levels. For the first time she had hope that she could help her troubled sons.

My experience verifies what scientific research confirms. With the right teaching techniques virtually all students can learn to spell and read English. I believe three main problems hinder progress in many schools today: whole word instruction, faulty phonics, and the separation of spelling from reading. The language arts program that you select should guard against these roadblocks to success.

1. PROBLEM NUMBER ONE: WHOLE-WORD INSTRUCTION. English needs to be taught by component parts rather than by a whole-word approach. People assume whole word teaching is possible because they think that Chinese is taught that way. It is not. A student does not learn distinctly different pictures for each dictionary entry. Chinese is a combination of a limited number of tonal syllable characters and classifier symbols fused together in various ways. Whole words have never been used in any language as the sole basis for writing. "Ordinary people (including children) can only remember about 1,500 to 2,000 abstract visual symbols." (McGuinness, p. 50).

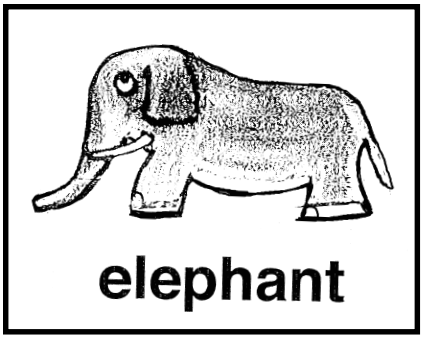
The first step in teaching any language is to isolate the most basic components used to make up that language. In English we have 500,000 words. Trying to learn each word one at a time will restrict the student. Sadly, most elementary teachers, in fact most college professors of education, do not know the basic components of English. Do you? How many ways do we have to spell the basic sounds of English? (70) We call the letter or letters that represent the sounds of English, phonograms.

The next step is to learn the rules that govern the use of these symbols. How many rules do we have in English? (28). With a working knowledge of the 70 phonograms plus 28 spelling rules (our 98 cards), we can phonetically explain 99% of the most commonly used words in the language and at least 87% of all the words in our dictionary. Does it sound unbelievable that the language with the most voluminous vocabulary can be reduced to 98 key components? It seems more incredible that such valuable information has been kept as a secret from people in high places.

2. PROBLEM NUMBER TWO: FAULTY PHONICS INSTRUCTION. Some think that phonics has been tried and didn't work, but phonics works consistently if taught properly. Often it is not. The whole-word method became the rage in the early part of the twentieth century. Periodically, a backlash of complaint would restore phonics for a time. Teachers unschooled in phonics would then combine the unfamiliar material with the whole-word techniques they knew. When this did not produce the promised success, teachers returned again to whole-word instruction. Each time teachers made the switch between whole words and phonics, our understanding of phonics became more frayed. Some of what is now taught as phonics is a weak substitute with worthless rules.

Teachers who fail using phonics usually use an inadequate version. At least three characteristics of weak phonics could be the cause. Evaluate any program by asking if it uses phony phonics, pokey phonics, or fickle phonics.

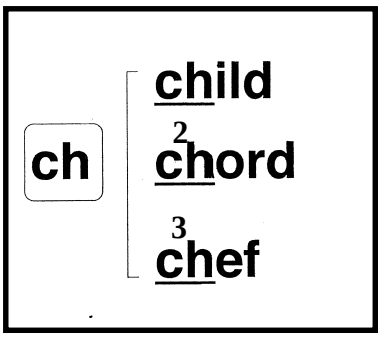
a. **Phony phonics**. I reviewed a state-approved textbook for beginning reading. Every lesson in the teacher's manual had a section boldly titled, "Phonics." I read every word in the flagged segments. Nothing even remotely related to phonics. In one lesson the text told the teacher to draw an elephant on the board. Under the picture she should write "elephant." She was to point to the picture and have the class repeat, "Elephant." Next she was to point to the word and have the class say, "Elephant." Many teachers like me never learned as children that letters represent sounds. Such a teacher could be deceived by this type of text and might naively tell parents that she uses phonics with every lesson.



b. **Pokey phonics**. Phonics instruction should be first and fast. Some systems take years to introduce the key components to the language. Unnecessarily delaying this vital instruction will force children to invent their own inadequate and unreliable systems.

Fragmenting key information into bits and pieces which are introduced separately over time makes retrieval hard. Instead of teaching only short vowel sounds or long vowel sounds, it is easier for a student to file together in one place of her mind all the common sounds a phonogram can make. A student who learns only the short vowel sound of O will experience frustration trying to read words like OPEN or DO. A person who knows from the beginning that the letter O has three possible sounds will not be discouraged that the first sound did not work. She has two other choices on the tip of her tongue to try.

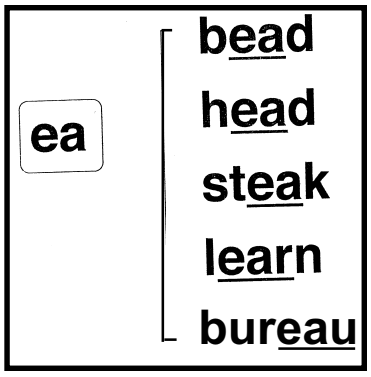
The same concept applies to multi-letter phonograms. CH can make three different sounds. Even a retarded or very young child can see CH and say the three sounds it can make. In many programs these sounds are taught separately over a period of years. Students in first grade may have a list of words using CH to say /ch/ as in *child.* In second or third grade they may have a list of words using CH to say /k/ as in *chord.* In fourth grade they might have a long list of words using CH to spell /sh/ as in *chef.* The three distinct sounds are rarely presented together in an uncluttered way.



c. **Fickle phonics**. Phony phonics is not real phonics. Pokey phonics may include correct information, but it is presented too slowly. Fickle phonics is unreliable. Like a fickle girl who flits between more than one lover, it muddles phonics with whole language ideas. It may involve bogus rules, a cluttered code, a backward focus, or misleading exercises.

(1) Bogus Rules. Fickle phonics teachs useless ideas like the cute sounding rule, "When two vowels go walking the first one does the talking." In other words, if we see two vowels together, the first one will say the name of the letter and the second one will be silent. (OA = /O/). Back in the '70s, I had my students mark page after page of words that illustrated this principle. The concept worked on screened worksheets, but in real life it failed repeatedly. I discovered why. The "two vowels going walking" rule is reliable only 27% of the time! It only **works consistently** with *aigh, ee, oa, oe.* It **commonly works** with *ay, ai.* It **possibly works** with *ea, ae.* It **usually does not work** with *ei, ey, ie, oo, ou.* It **never works** with *au, augh, ear, eau, eu, oi, oy, ui.*

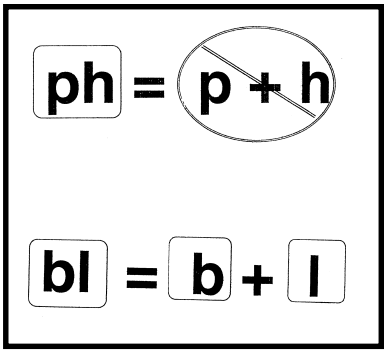
The effective way to deal with vowel pairs is to teach each vowel team as a separate phonogram that the student recognizes instantly by sound. Our goal should be to establish the most instant response between the symbols and the sound, not to waste time with unfruitful mental gymnastics.



A student can be easily taught all the sounds that EA regularly makes. Such a student is prepared for EA to say /E/ in *bead,* /e/ in *head,* /A/ in *steak,* /er/ in *learn,* and the /O/ in *bureau.* A student who learned the Two Vowels Go Walking rule might stumble over words like *head, steak, learn,* and *bureau.* People conclude, because of bogus rules like this, that English is so complex and is spelled so unpredictably that teaching phonics is useless. They don't understand that the problem is not the language, it is a faulty presentation of the language.

(2) A Cluttered Code. The ideal way to teach a complex subject is to identify the most essential core parts. The phonograms and rules (my magic cards) are the consistent components to a proper understanding of English. Elevating blends to the level of the phonograms adds needless complexity and creates unnecessary confusion.

A blend is made by running together the sounds of two or more phonograms. For example, if we quickly say the sound of the B plus the sound of the L we have the blend /bl/. A student who knows the individual sounds can easily combine them for the blend. Contrast BL with the phonogram PH. Together P and H can represent /f/, a sound distinctly different from the sounds these letters would make being blended together normally.



The idea of blending can and should be taught with spelling words, but presenting blends in the same way as phonograms weakens the core foundation. If we teach blends in isolation, we add 76 or more unnecessary units that water down the essential foundation.

(3) A Backwards Focus. The eye should be trained to move from left to right in reading English. Some systems group words by word endings. Activities include reading a series of words by simply changing the first letter: *day, may, pay, ray, say.* This misleads the student to expect words that look alike will sound alike.

English is built from phonogram units, but cannot be consistently organized by appearance. Many words that sound alike are spelled differently (rowed, road). Likewise, numerous phonetically reliable words sound different but look alike (timber, climber/ rose, lose/ home, some/ to, go/ have, cave/ put, but/ pant, want/ are, care/ both, cloth/ hat, what/ etc.).

Words that end the same may not sound the same	
day	**gas**
may	**has**
pay	**was**

Students who expect all look-alike words to sound alike will stumble over words like *gas, has, was.* The letter S and the letter A can represent more than one sound. *Has* and *was* are not irregular. One or more of the phonograms use a predictable alternative sound: gas = /g-a-s/; has = /h-a-z/; was = /w-ah-z/.

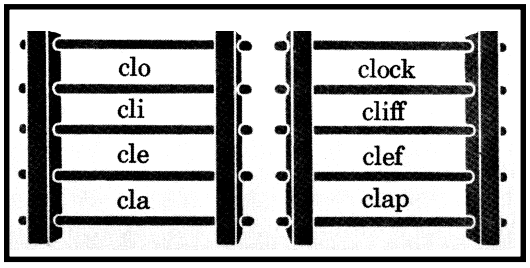
Focusing on the final rhyme confuses eye sequencing from back to front, a problem with dyslexia. Organizing by rhyme burdens the mind with an unnecessary overload. English has over 1260 rhymes. It is better to teach 70 phonograms than to memorize a multitude of unpredictable rhymes. While *heard* and *beard* appear irregular in so-called "word family" programs, these words are regular in a phonogram based program. *(Beard* uses four phonograms /b-ea-r-d/. *Heard* uses three phonograms /h-ear-d/.)

heard h ear d

beard b ea r d

(4) Misleading Exercises. Phonics ladders are tools to teach blending. The plan is to give a consonant or two and then a single vowel. The student is taught to use the short vowel sound and form new words by adding different consonants.

This type of exercise is unsound phonemically for two reasons. First, a vowel at the end of a syllable rarely has the short sound. Contrast the words *co-ma* and *com-ma.* If a student sees CLO as a separate unit, he should expect the final vowel sound to be OH (as in clo-sure) not AH (as in clock).



Secondly, if the vowel is not at the end, we need to see the next letter or letters before we can determine the sound it will make. Several simple patterns commonly change the vowel sound. Is it a part of a two-letter phonogram team (OA, OW, OU)? If so, we might read the words as: *cloak, clown, clout.* Is the vowel sound influenced by a silent final E *(clove)?*

The vowel sound cannot be determined without seeing the entire word.			
	long vowel at end	**2-letter vowel**	**silent letter effect**
clo	**clo**-sure, **clo**-ver	**clo**ak, **clo**is-ter, **clo**ud, **clo**wn	**clo**ve, **clo**the
cli	**cli**-ent, **cli**-max	--	**cli**mb, **cli**me
cle	**Cle**-o-pat-ra	**cle**an, **cle**ar, **cle**ek, **cle**rk	**Cle**veland, un-**cle**
cla	**cla**-vate, **cla**-vier	**cla**im **cla**use, **cla**w, **cla**y	**Cla**re, de-**cl**are

Leonard Ayres scientifically organized a list of the one thousand most frequently used words in the English language. With phonics ladders, over a third of this core list of words would appear to be exceptions. With a phonogram plus simple rule base, less than one percent of these words are "rule breakers."

Spelling and reading skills should progress to an instantaneous, almost subconscious, response. This happens by building in the student a second nature instinct for the language. Teaching methods should logically build such automatic responses. Avoid methods that do the opposite. Effective phonics deals with the sounds represented by phonograms and gives a complete, uncluttered, reliable presentation of the code as soon as possible.

3. PROBLEM NUMBER THREE: SEPARATING SPELLING AND READING. Dr. Hilde Mosse, an expert in children's reading disorders, proclaimed, "Contrary to the prevailing educational theory, reading and writing belong together; they reinforce each other." (Mosse, p. 14). Typically today, reading is taught first and spelling is delayed as an unrelated afterthought. Children are taught to read /k-a-t/ and spell /See-A-Tee/. While reading utilizes the sounds the letters represent, spelling is taught using alphabet letter names. The two skills seem unrelated.

For all children to understand the magical idea that letters represent speech sounds, the code must be presented as reversible. We should think to spell /k-a-t/ and read /k-a-t/. This is best done by teaching spelling as the foundation to reading, as teachers did in the old days. Students should spell their way into reading. In spelling we analyze the individual parts that make up a word. We teach a child to unglue a word syllable by syllable and sound by sound as he writes it. This is best done by dictation, not by copying. Reading thereby becomes a natural side effect. The student blends back together what he has learned to take apart and analyze.

The author of *The Writing Road to Reading* said, "The failings of most of the phonics methods may be summarized in that they neglect spelling and do not teach the saying and writing of the forty-five basic sounds of the phonograms of the language before trying to read." (Spalding p. 27).

Findings of Scientific Research

Eighty percent of students today are taught with whole-word methods. Massive academic failure shows we need change, and scientific evidence shows where. Correctly taught phonics must form the foundation for spelling and reading instruction.

Illiteracy in America, a book published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in Washington, D.C., explains, among other things, the achievement decline in our country. The National Council reports, "Since 1911, a total of 124 studies have compared the look-say eclectic approaches with phonics-first programs. Not one found look-say superior." Yet, "since 1955 approximately 85 percent of our 16,000 school districts have been using this eclectic approach. . . Regardless of labels, only about 15 percent of the nation's primary children have received instruction in direct, systematic, and intensive phonics." (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, p. 23)

Susan Hall, the president of the Illinois Branch of the International Dyslexia Association, comments, "Millions of capable children are not learning to read well in America's schools today. The causes and cures are well-known in the research community, but classroom practice has been slow to change. Almost all children can learn to read well if taught with appropriate methods. But not all children in today's classrooms are receiving the type of instruction that will equip them to be good readers." (Hall, p. xvii).

With the 98 keys, virtually all students can learn to spell and read English!

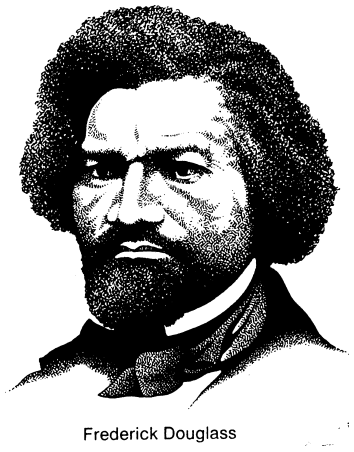
In a publication of the International Reading Association a leading Canadian reading expert, Dr. Keith E. Stanovich, confirms the necessity of phonics. "That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established conclusions in all behavioral science." (Stanovich, pp. 285-6)

Dr. Diane McGuinness, in a newly published book, summarizes the last 25 years of empirical studies on reading instruction. "From research in the classroom and the clinic, we have discovered that when the sequence of reading and spelling instruction is compatible with the logic of the alphabet code and with the child's linguistic and logical development, learning to read and spell proceeds rapidly and smoothly for all children and is equally effective for poor readers of all ages." (McGuinness, p. xiii)

Students need to internalize the symbols that form the code for written English. This information must be considered vital, not just an afterthought. A little dab won't do. For the most effective results, we need to teach early, direct, systematic, intensive phonics.

EARLY--first and fast (Teach the code as the foundational beginning.)
DIRECT-- straightforward, precise instruction
SYSTEMATIC -- scientifically ordered, not incidental
INTENSIVE -- one or more times a day
PHONICS -- link the sounds of speech to letters that represent the sounds.

Correctly taught phonics replaces the frustration and insecurity of whole-word chaos. Instead of word-by-word memory or random guessing by context, the student has a logical basis for mastering the language. The fog lifts and the student is free to explore independently the wonderful world of print.


Frederick Douglass

Reading is the pathway to freedom!

Conclusion

A kind mistress started teaching the young slave child about letters and the sounds they represent in English. This changed his life forever and impacted the lives of many others. He had progressed to spelling three-or four-letter words when the master discovered what was happening. He forbade her to teach the boy any more and explained why when he screamed, "If you teach [him] to read, it would forever unfit him to be a slave!"

In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass wrote, "From that moment on, I understood the pathway to freedom. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read." (Douglass, p. 48)

Once Douglass had a taste of the alphabetic code and how it worked, he searched for the missing pieces. He would tease the little white boys to tell him more. He might say to them, "I bet I know more words than you do." He would write in the dirt several words he had learned. They would then write some more. Eventually he mastered the language well enough to compose a letter giving him permission to travel, sign it with his master's name, and use the paper to escape. This runaway slave became an internationally famous spokesman for the anti-slavery movement and helped lead his people to freedom.

Slavery has been overturned as an institution in America, and yet 93 million in our nation are in bondage. People who cannot read and write fluidly can never reach their full potential. We can and must help set them free. We have the tools to do so. I hold them in my hands. If we will provide a logical presentation of our language using the most basic component parts, massive illiteracy will become a thing of the past.