

Why California Kids Can't Read

The Whole State Went Whole Language, Whole Hog

By Jill Stewart

Rebecca, a pony-tailed second-grader, sits in a school on Los Angeles' upscale Westside working on her personal journal, the latest rage for teaching kids to read. She fills a page with crooked sentences, then proudly hands it to me. I read the page. It begins: "I go t gum calls."

While the techniques known as "whole language" may seem bizarre, they now predominate in California, the hottest fad since "open" classrooms of the 1970s. Since 1987, California schools have used a reading "framework" created by state educators that downplays traditional skills.

Whole language, which sounds so promising when described by its proponents, has proved disastrous when applied to — and by — real people. In the eight years since whole language swept California, fourth-grade reading scores have plummeted, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Indeed, California fourth graders are now such poor readers that only the children in Louisiana and Guam — both hampered by pitifully-backward education systems — get worse scores.

The situation has deteriorated so far that former Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, who oversaw the reading framework, now calls it "fatally flawed" for its failure to anticipate the anti-skills hysteria. Indeed, he is at the forefront of a movement to return basic reading skills to the grade schools. Says Honig today: "Things got out of hand. We never dreamed it would be driven to this bizarre edge."

A reading task force appointed by state superintendent Delaine Eastin has urged a return to intensive, skill-based reading in early grade school, while retaining the use of rich literature. But Eastin has been met with a

palace revolt in her department and from local bureaucracies. Bitter resistance from whole language purists has delayed Eastin's reform plan, which experts widely agree must heavily re-emphasize "word-attack" skills such as phonics and devote two hours per day to reading in early grade school. In a slap at education officials, state lawmakers have approved, and Governor Pete Wilson signed into law, an "ABCs" bill requiring grade school phonics, and are now pursuing a spelling law.

How California fell so far so fast is a study in the pitfalls of untested mass innovation. Says Douglas Carnine, an Oregon scholar and one of Eastin's consultants: "I fear that the education leaders in California still don't see the real problem that has sent California to the absolute bottom in reading. You cannot keep using an entire state as an experiment. You wouldn't administer a drug to three million people without testing it first, would you?" According to articles published by the American Federation of Teachers in 1995, no meaningful research has ever verified the claims of whole language theorists.

Meanwhile, word spread that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was completing a \$25-million longitudinal series of studies — the most extensive in the U.S. — which definitively showed that small children don't pick up reading any more "naturally" than anthropologists learn to decipher hieroglyphics or Marines figure out the Morse code. According to research director Reid Lyon, the eyes of a good reader "decode" every single letter, then meld the letters into sounds and words so effortlessly that the process cannot be observed by others.

In 1994, armed with NAEP scores and the NIH study, pro-skills advocates launched a philosophical war. Whole language ideologues quickly launched a public-relations counterattack. They blamed new immigrants, the recession and poor school libraries for ruining reading scores, and they passionately attacked the NAEP test itself, arguing that whole language imparts subtle skills that can't be measured, even by NAEP's widely-respected mix of long, short, open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

On the opposing side, however, a raft of pro-skills educators poured forth, emboldened after years of being dismissed as fossils. They pointed out that reading levels among California's white children had plummeted to dead last among their racial group in the nation. And they revealed that New Zealand (where whole language originated) was mired in a whole language disaster: one-quarter of its grade school children could not read, and needed tutors.

According to Honig, in many districts that went "whole language, whole hog", 30 percent of the children now need intensive skills tutoring such as the lavishly expensive Reading Recovery program — yet those same bureaucrats oppose a return to skills. "Officials in Sacramento and in places like L.A. County are still saying beginning readers can pick up their reading skills in the context of a story, while absorbing whole ideas," says Honig. "It's like watching doctors bleed their patients."

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