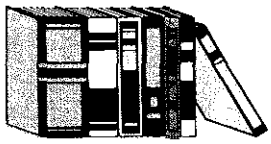
The Blumenfeld Education Letter



"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 these risks. "Without vision, the people perish."

How Should We Teach Our Children to Write? Cursive First, Print Later!

For the last six years or so, I have been lecturing parents at homeschool conferences on how to teach the three R's: reading 'riting, and 'rithmetic. I explain in great detail how to teach children to read phonetically through intensive, systematic phonics. But when it comes to writing, I have to explain to a very skeptical audience why cursive writing should be taught first and print later.

I usually start my lecture by asking the parents if they think that their children ought to be taught to write. I explain that many educators now believe that handwriting is really an obsolete art that has been replaced by the typewriter and word processor, and that it is no longer necessary to teach children to write. They imply that if a child wants to learn to write, he or she can do so without the help of any school instruction.

However, I've yet to meet any parents who have been sold on such daring, but questionable, futurist thinking. They all believe that their children should be taught to write. And, of course, I agree with them. After all, no one knows what needs their children will have for good handwriting twenty years hence. Also, you can't carry a two-thousand-dollar laptop or a typewriter everywhere you go. The question then becomes: How shall we teach children to write? And my answer is quite clear: Do not teach your child to print by ball-and-stick, or italic, or Denelian. Teach your child to write a standard cursive script. And the reason why I can say this with confidence is because that's the way I was taught to write in the first grade in a New York City public school back in 1931 when teachers knew what they were doing.

In those days children were not taught to print. We were all taught cursive right off the bat, and the result is that people of my generation generally have better handwriting than those of recent generations. Apparently, cursive first went out of style in the 1940s when the schools adopted ball-and-stick manuscript to go with the new Dick and Jane look-say reading programs. Ball-and-stick was part of the new progressive reforms of primary education.

But ball-and-stick has produced a handwriting disaster. Why? Because by the time children are introduced to cursive in the third grade, their writing habits are so fixed that they resent having to learn an entirely new way of writing, the teachers do not have

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the time to supervise the development of a good cursive script, and the students are usually unwilling to take the time and do the practice needed to develop a good cursive handwriting.

The result is that many youngsters continue to print for the rest of their lives, some develop a hybrid handwriting style consisting of a mixture of print and cursive, and some do develop a good cursive because they'd always wanted to write cursive and had been secretly practicing it for years without their teachers' or parents' knowledge.

Apparently, all of those schools that introduce cursive in the second or third grade must believe that it has some value, or else why would they teach it at all? The problem is that by requiring the students to learn ball-and-stick first, they create obstacles to the development of a good cursive script.

The reason for teaching ball-and-stick first, we are told, is because first graders do not have the motor skills or muscular dexterity in their fingers to be able to write cursive at that age. But that argument is totally false. Prior to the 1940s virtually all children in public and private schools were taught cursive in the first grade and virtually all learned to write very nicely. All were trained in penmanship and did the various exercises—the ovals, the rainbows, the ups and downs—that helped us develop good handwriting. We were also taught how to hold the writing instrument (or stylus) correctly, cradled between the thumb and the forefinger (also known as the index finger) with the tip of the writing instrument resting on the long finger next to the forefinger, in a very relaxed position, enabling a writer to write for hours without tiring.

On the other hand, when a child is taught to print first, the writing instrument is held straight up with three or four fingers in a tight grip with much pressure being exerted downward on the paper placed in a straight position. When these children are then taught cursive in the second or third grade they do not change the way they hold the writing instrument because a motor or muscular habit has been established that is not easy to alter. That is why so many children develop poor cursive scripts because of the way they hold their pens. Children do not easily unlearn bad habits. Which is why I tell parents that there are two very important no-no's in primary education: do not teach anything that later has to be unlearned, and do not let a child develop a bad habit. Instruct the child to do it right from the beginning.

How Cursive Helps Reading

A question most often asked by parents when I assert that cursive should be taught first is: won't learning cursive interfere with learning to read printed words? The answer is: not at all. All of us who learned cursive first had no problem learning to read print. In fact it helped us. How? Well, one of the biggest problems children have when learning to read primary-school print and write in ball-and-stick is that so many letters look alike—such as b's and d's; f's and t's; g's, q's, and p's—that children become confused and make many unnecessary reading errors. In cursive, however, there is a big difference between a *b* and a *d*. In cursive writing, a *b* starts like an *l* while a *d* begins like writing the letter *a*. In other words, in cursive, children do not confuse b's and d's, because the movements of the hand make it impossible to confuse the two letters. And this knowledge acquired by the hand is transferred to the reading process. Thus, learning to write cursive helps learning to read print.

Another aid to reading is that cursive requires children to write from left to right so that the letters will join with one another in proper sequence. The blending of the sounds is made more apparent by the joining of the

letters. In ball-and-stick, some children write the letters backwards, and often the spacing is so erratic that you can't tell where one word ends and another begins. Cursive teaches spatial discipline.

Another important benefit of cursive is that it helps the child learn to spell correctly since the hand acquires knowledge of spelling patterns through hand movements that are used again and again in spelling. This is the same phenomenon that occurs when pianists or typists learn patterns of hand movements through continued repetition.

Another question often asked by mothers of six-year-olds is what will their children do when asked on a job application to "please print." My answer is that I don't advocate not teaching a child to print, I simply say teach cursive first, print later. Besides, that child will have plenty of time to learn to print between the first grade and applying for a job as a teenager.

The Ease of Cursive

I am often asked: "Isn't cursive harder to learn than print?" No. It's just the opposite. It is difficult, if not unnatural, for children to draw straight lines and perfect circles, which is required in ball-and-stick, when they would much rather be doing curves and curls. In fact, all of cursive consists of only three movements: the undercurve, the overcurve, and the up and down. That's all there is to it.

Another important point is that it takes time and supervision to help a child develop a good cursive script, and one has that time in the first grade, not the third grade. The first-grade child may start out writing in a large scrawl, but in only a matter of weeks, that scrawl will be controlled by those little fingers into a very nice manageable script. Practice makes perfect, and children should be given practice in writing cursive.

If you've wondered why your grandparents usually have better handwriting than you do, well now you know the answer. If you teach cursive first, you can always develop a good print style later. But if you teach print first, you may never develop a good cursive style. Thus it is absolutely essential to teach cursive first.

Also, by concentrating on the development of a good cursive handwriting, you eliminate the nonsense of first starting with ball-and-stick, then moving to slant ball-and-stick, or some other transitional script, finally ending up with cursive. Children will only make the effort to learn one primary way of writing which they will use for the rest of their lives. They don't need to be taught three ways, two of which will be discarded.

Incidentally, I have no objection to children drawing letters on their own when learning the alphabet. But once they start learning to read, formal instruction in cursive should begin.

Cursive Helps the Left-Handed

Also, it may surprise the reader to learn that left-handed children gain special benefits from learning cursive first. When left-handed children are taught ball-and-stick first, their tendency is to use the hook position in writing since the stylus is held straight up and the paper is also positioned straight. This means that as the child proceeds printing from left to right, the child's arm will cover what has already been written. This can be avoided if the left-handed child learns to write from the bottom up, the way right-handed children write. But this is difficult, if not impossible, to do when printing ball-and-stick.

However, if a left-handed child is taught to write cursive first, he or she must then turn the paper clockwise and must write

from the bottom up, since it is impossible to use the hook position if the paper is turned clockwise. Right-handers, of course, turn the paper counter-clockwise. But left-handers are quite capable of developing as good a cursive handwriting as any right-hander by writing from the bottom up. (In fact, the secret of good handwriting may be in the position of the paper.)

All of this must lead to one simple conclusion: teach cursive first and print later. There are few things that help enhance a child's academic self-esteem more than the development of good handwriting. It helps reading, it helps spelling, and because writing is made easy, accurate, and esthetically pleasant, it helps thinking.

As Francis Bacon once said: "Reading maketh a full man . . . and writing an exact man."

Kiryas Joel: The Politics of Indecision

(The following commentary on the Kiryas Joel case was written by Karen Iacovelli, Executive Director of the National Parents Alliance.)

When the New York State School Boards Association challenged the constitutionality of the Kiryas Joel special education public school district, it could barely conceal its agenda: contempt for parental choice in education, hostility toward religion, and protectionism for special interest control over the government educational monopoly.

The Association did not bargain for the cunning jurisprudence of the politically chilly Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor, nor the couched apology from Justice Anthony M. Kennedy for the high court's anti-religious bias.

In 1989, the New York legislature attempted to accommodate the thorny issue of disabled Satmar Hasidic Jewish school children not easily assimilated within the local public school. By legislating a special geographic school district that just happened to correspond to the Hasidim living within that area, the Hasidic children received special education instruction free from harassment by some of their public school neighbors. The Hasidic school did not offer religious instruction.

The School Boards Association challenged this legislation, claiming it a violation of the Establishment Clause. In one of the more remarkable displays of Supreme Court indecision, the Justices upheld the charge of unconstitutionality, sort of.

The majority opinion, delivered June 28 by Justice David H. Souter, cautiously stuck to the narrow issue of whether the legislature had shown favoritism to one religion when it created the special public school district. Justice Souter made it clear that the most troubling aspect of the case was that the legislature failed to guarantee that "the next similarly situated group seeking a school district of its own will receive one."

There is no question that the legislature demonstrated favoritism toward one religion, and that the favoritism was motivated by politics, not concern for the education of children. The creation of the Kiryas Joel school district bought time for politicians unwilling to tackle the bigger, more controversial issues of fundamental parental rights, and bought votes from the Jewish community, through a theatrical display of political "compassion."

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor apparently saw through years of judicial and political hyperbole. In a stunning, separate opinion, she challenged the Court's failure to address the broad issues of what criteria should be used to assess state establishment of and entanglement with religion. She also blueprinted what the New York legislature

might do to create school choice legislation that would pass constitutional muster.

Almost within hours of the decision, New York Governor Mario Cuomo seized upon Justice O'Connor's legal sketch and drafted a reengineered version of the original special school district legislation. Within days, the legislature passed a bill increasing the amount of school districts that could be created by other municipalities, within carefully restricted guidelines. Moments later, the School Boards Association issued another legal challenge.

Kiryas Joel was found unconstitutional because the New York state legislature did not have the political courage to create a statewide system of school choice, with funds flowing directly to parents. The courts are finally beginning to distinguish between government "advancement" of religion and enhancement of education, and between religious entanglement with schools and assistance for children. It is ironic that New York continues to be a Mesopotamia of church/state litigation. Only 20 years ago, the legislature attempted to implement the country's first-ever comprehensive school choice program. That act was challenged by a taxpayer group claiming the school choice legislation to be a violation of the First Amendment (Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty v. Nyquist, 413 U.S. 756, 1973).

The legal standard used since 1971 to assess whether a law or practice violates the separation of church and state is the "Lemon test," the three-prong rule resulting from Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971). Using this "tripartite test," a statute or governmental policy (1) must have a secular legislative purpose, (2) must have a principal effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion, and (3) must not foster "an excessive government entanglement with religion." Obviously, the Lemon law has been bitter medicine for the practice of religion in America. Depending on the social agenda of court justices, Lemon can and has been used to stifle religious expression.

Hostility Toward Religion

In deciding Kiryas Joel, the Court refused to use Lemon as the standard by which to assess the constitutionality of the Kiryas Joel district. Additionally, Justice O'Conner urged the Court to examine its hostility towards religion: "The Establishment Clause does not demand hostility to religion, religious ideas, religious people, or religious schools," O'Connor decried. In the troubling case of Aguilar v. Felton, 463 U.S. 402 (1985), the Court found it unconstitutional for public school teachers to provide remedial instruction for poor children enrolled in parochial schools. Last year, the Court found in favor of parents seeking reimbursement for an interpreter for their deaf child enrolled in parochial school, in Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District, 61 U.S.L.W. 4641 (1993). If this sounds confusing to you, you are not alone, and Justice O'Connor took the Court to task for its inability to use one consistent standard in evaluating church-state issues as they apply to education. This is very, very encouraging news.

Our courts have consistently found problems with any school choice plan in which school buildings or organizations are the recipients of taxpayer money. When parents and children are the direct beneficiaries of funds, the courts appear to be leaning toward the side of fundamental parental rights to direct the education of their children. The bad news in Kiryas Joel is that the Court had an opportunity to reverse Aguilar, toss out Lemon, and create a new standard.

It remains our task to effectively demonstrate to the courts that states do not have

a compelling interest to run a government education monopoly which infringes upon fundamental parental rights and the free exercise of religion.

In deciding Kiryas Joel, the good news is that the Justices are asking for the right case that will decide who controls our children and our pursuit of religious practice free from financial and political burdens of government.

(The National Parents Alliance is a New York based non-profit organization committed to promoting fundamental parental rights. It produces the Parents News Network, a New York television program for parents, as well as education-issues videos. Karen Iacovelli is the Executive Director of NPA, a concerned parent, and constitutional law scholar. NPA phone number is 718-482-0200 or FAX 718-482-1656.)

On Learning to Read Chinese

Frank Smith, leading whole-language guru, writes in his book *Reading Without Nonsense*, (p.56): "Reading printed words in Chinese is no more difficult than reading them in English, although the Chinese symbols do not decode directly to sound; the process of immediate recognition is the same. . . . Learning to recognize thousands of different forms is not such a big achievement, but learning to reproduce them is."

In other words, according to Frank Smith, children can be taught to read English as if it were Chinese. He believes that the alphabet was invented not so much to help in reading but to help in writing. Apparently, Smith doesn't know how difficult it is for a Chinese child to learn to read Chinese. For enlightenment on that subject, we must turn to an article written by John Edgar Johnson, entitled "The Chinese Language," published in 1873 in *The Biblioteca Sacra and Theological Eclectic* (Vol. 30, pp. 62-76). Mr. Johnson writes:

The Chinese is a language by itself, perfectly unique. It is the only specimen of a purely primitive tongue that now remains to us, and for this reason, if for no other, possesses great interest for the student of philology. It is just such a language as two persons would probably devise if thrown together in a desert, neither ever having seen a human being before.... We shall never be able to understand the Chinese, until we know more of their language....

A good many of its characters are ideographic; their meaning is suggested by their form or sound. There is no alphabet, and each object or idea is represented by a distinct sign. Of course, there is really no end to the language; it is infinite. Some writers have estimated the number of words as high as two hundred and sixty thousand, eight hundred and ninety-nine (Montucci); but the total of really different symbols in use among good writers will not exceed twenty-five thousand. Ten thousand signs, however, will enable one to read any book; while three thousand is sufficient for all ordinary purposes. The origin of these characters, like that of the alphabet among Western nations, is lost in tradition. Chinese writers ascribe it to Hwangti, an early emperor, or to Tsang-Lieh, a celebrated statesman, both of whom are said to have lived about 2700 B.C. The first characters were derived from a study of nature, and were imitations of its forms....

The first characters, we have said, were rude outlines of natural objects. A crescent, for instance, was recognized as representing the moon. A circle with a dot in the center, stood for the sun. The word *sin*, heart, was represented by a figure which resembled that organ. It is evident that the number of such signs that could be invented was comparatively limited, and so it became necessary, quite early, to combine those symbols, already understood, for the purpose of conveying new ideas....

Perhaps seven eighths of all the characters in Chinese have been formed from the union of about two thousand symbols. We may suppose that the mode of procedure was something as follows. The spoken language was already well understood. Hwangti, or Tsang-Kieh, instead of adopting arbitrary signs to represent sounds as has been done in other languages, depicted the object and applied to it the name which it had in the colloquial language. There was nothing about the character itself that gave one the least idea as to its sound; that had to be learned arbitrarily. Just, in fact, as is the case with the letters of the alphabet. But it will be seen that this method had its limits. When about two thousand signs had been devised, human ingenuity was well-nigh exhausted and the symbols were getting to be very complex. But meanwhile nearly every sound of which

the vocal organs were capable having been represented, the emperor or the statesman, whichever it was, hit upon the plan of combining these original characters to form new ones.

These compounds or derivatives which constitute, as we have said, the large mass of all the words in the Chinese language, were formed in this manner. The symbol on the left was to indicate, though oftentimes remotely, the meaning of the new sign; the symbol on the right was purely phonetic,

The range of pronunciation in Chinese, however, is much greater than in any other language. The different cadences which they are able to give a word lie quite beyond the descriptive powers of a European. Some words, and especially foreign ones, are formed by the union of signs which sound like the new word when pronounced. There is no root that gives meaning, and the reader is frequently cautioned against falling into error on this account by placing the sign for "mouth" beside the new compound to show that all of the component words are merely phonetic. This is, in fact, the syllabic method of writing. Thus, at Canton, where the Chinese come in contact with foreigners, it was found necessary to have some symbol to represent Mister; so they took the character *mi*, "beautiful," and *sz*, "scholar," not because there was anything in the meaning of these words to suggest the object; far from it, but simply because when pronounced together they sounded like Mister.

So too coffee is written *ka fi; ka* means "frame," and *fi* means "not," and of course they do not indicate the idea. An inhabitant of Canton who should meet these words would pronounce them mentally, and immediately detect their meaning. But a man back in the country, who knew nothing about foreigners, and never heard them named, would puzzle over them, seeking to discover their signification from the meaning of their parts. Good scholars are very careful how they employ purely phonetic words, and their use is therefore quite limited. . . .

There are several methods by which the characters of the language have been arranged for the purpose of reference. The one adopted by the dictionary called Kanghi Tsz' Tien is in general use. Two hundred and fourteen familiar symbols, which enter into nearly all the derivatives, are taken as clefs, or radicals. These are arranged according to the number of strokes of which they are composed. First, those of one stroke, etc., down to those formed by seventeen strokes. Then again, the derivatives under each radical are arranged in the same manner. So that if you wish to look out a word in the dictionary, notice first its radical part, distinguish that. Most usually it is written, as has been said, at the left of the compound; but sometimes it is placed above, below, or so as to enclose the rest of the symbol. Having discovered the radical, which, on account of variations, is not always an easy task, count the number of strokes of which it is composed. . . .

Our first piece of advice, then, to a person who thought of taking up the study of Chinese, would be this: Forget everything you know about the genius of language. Your present ideas will be a positive damage to you. Get rid of them at any cost. Begin over again. First, commit to memory the two hundred and fourteen radicals; they are all familiar words, and the time thus expended will not be thrown away. Then, learn the names and meaning of all the common phonetics or primitives, which are rather more than a thousand in number. With this alphabet you will be prepared to enter upon the acquisition of the derivative forms, which, after all, constitute at least seven eighths of the language.

An author whose name is now forgotten recommends the student, after he is pretty well advanced, to commit to memory the four books and the five classics. This is the method pursued by the Chinese youth. Or rather, they begin by committing to memory sentences, pages, and then whole books, before they are instructed in the meaning of a single character that they have learned. A dozen sit in one room, and repeat aloud the words which they wish to fix in their minds. Of course, it makes a noise. But the quick ear of the pedagogue detects the slightest inaccuracy of tone, and, reaching over with a long bamboo, he somewhat forcibly calls the attention of his pupil to the fact.

As we can see from the above, a child learning to read English has a far easier time of it if he or she is taught by intensive, systematic phonics. The child first learns to recognize the 26 letters of the alphabet, and then learns the sounds the letters stand for. The child is then drilled in consonant-vowel combinations in order to develop an automatic association between letters and sounds and syllables and sounds. By developing this phonetic reflex, the child is then able to become an accurate, proficient reader of written English. While there is nothing in the Chinese character that gives one the least idea as to how it is pronounced, the written English word is composed of letters and

spelling forms that give the reader an exact idea of how it is pronounced. What a tremendous improvement over the Chinese system.

The Chinese student must memorize 214 radicals and a thousand primitives before he can begin to read. And then he must memorize four books and five classics. Not an easy task. Yet, Prof. Smith would have American children learn to read English as if it were Chinese, depriving the child of all the advantages of our alphabetic system. And, no doubt, he calls that progress! What a diabolical way to produce an illiterate America!

While Prof. Smith tends to belittle the invention of the alphabet, Dr. Robert K. Logan, a professor of physics at the University of Toronto, has written a fascinating book that shows the importance of the alphabet to our civilization. In the book, *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization* (Morrow, 1986), Dr. Logan writes:

> The magic of the phonetic alphabet is that it is more than a writing system; it is also a system for organizing information. Of all mankind's inventions, with the possible exception of language itself, nothing has proved more useful or led to more innovations than the alphabet. . . . It has influenced the development of our thought patterns, our social institutions, and our very sense of ourselves. The alphabet . . . has contributed to the development of codified law, monotheism, abstract science, deductive logic, and individualism, each a unique contribution of Western thought. Through the printing press it has reinforced or encouraged many of the key historical events of modern Europe including the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of democracy, mass education, nationalism, and capitalism. (p. 17)
>
> It is the first thing that is taught in school because it is the gateway to learning and knowledge....
>
> The alphabet effect is a subliminal phenomenon. There is more to using the alphabet than just learning how to read and write. Using the alphabet... also entails the ability to: 1) code and decode, 2) convert auditory signals or sounds into visual signs, 3) think deductively, 4) classify information, and 5) order words through the process of alphabetization...
>
> What [the children] learn are the intellectual by-products of the alphabet, such as abstraction, analysis, rationality, and classification, which form the essence of the alphabet effect and the basis for abstract scientific and logical thinking. The use of the phonetic alphabet helps explain why Western and Chinese thinking are so different (abstract and theoretical for the West versus concrete and practical for the East). (p. 21)

Chapter 3 is entitled, "A Comparison of Eastern and Western Writing Systems and Their Impact on Cultural Patterns." In it, Dr. Logan writes:

> It is not just the concrete nature of Chinese ideograms but the difficulty in classifying them that makes them less conducive to abstract scientific thinking than an alphabetic script. . . . (p. 55)
>
> The linking together of standardized repeatable elements to form words also enables the alphabet to serve as a paradigm for deductive logic in which ideas or statements are linked together to form arguments. This is not the case with Chinese writing and might partially explain why the Chinese never developed Western-style logic. Their thinkers favored dialectical forms rather than deductive ones, and their reasoning tends to be inductive rather than deductive. It is not logical but rather analogical, much as Chinese characters are analogs of the words they represent.
>
> The linear, sequential mode of building a system that the alphabet encouraged and Chinese characters discouraged also influenced industrial development in the East and the West. Despite their technological progress, the Chinese never linked their inventions together to create the assemply-line production characteristic of the Western Industrial Revolution. (p. 57)

In other words, there is much more involved in the differences between alphabetic writing and ideographic writing than Frank Smith would have us believe. That being the case, how could anyone seriously think that it is possible to teach American children to read English as if it were Chinese? Yet, that is what our educators are doing with whole language.
