

# 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."

## California's Reading Debacle: When the Incompetent Rule, the Children Suffer

A lady in Southern California recently faxed me an article about California's literacy disaster containing much interesting information about what happened when Whole Language was introduced in California schools in 1987. The article, "The Blackboard Bungle" by Jill Stewart, appeared in the March 1-7, 1996, issue of *LA Weekly*. Ms. Stewart writes:

Since 1987, whole-language theory has swept California. At its further extreme are whole-language zealots who believe reading and writing are natural processes that children will pick up on their own without formal instruction if they are immersed in good literature and allowed to freely write without correction. The theory's basic principles have been institutionalized in the form of a widely acclaimed reading "framework" adopted by the state Board of Public Education that downplays the teaching of traditional reading skills. On the plus side, the era of whole language has ushered into California's classrooms the use of literature and popular storybooks, and has inspired teachers to push children to create their own handwritten stories. "The core idea of whole language," says one of its most vocal proponents, Mel Grubb of the California Literature Project at Cal State Dominguez Hills, "is that children no longer are forced to learn skills that are disembodied from the experience of reading a story. The enjoyment and the wonder of the story are absorbed just as the skills are absorbed."

Poor Mr. Grubb seems to be confused about the difference between reading a story and learning to read. Apparently he thinks both are the same. Ms. Stewart continues:

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

And who is to blame for this "near disaster"—which is not near but actual? The article states:

It has become clear that many of the problems stem from a tragic misinterpretation of the state's 1989 reading framework, intended as a helpful supplement to traditional lessons but used by many administrators as a wholesale replacement for them.

Was it, indeed, a "tragic" misinterpretation or a deliberate misinterpretation? In 1987, California already had a horrendous

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reading problem. An article from the *San Francisco Examiner*, reprinted in the *Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA) of Nov. 18, 1987, states:

Almost one in six adults in California is "functionally illiterate," and most of those who can't read are native English speakers who went to school in the United States, according to a new study by the state Department of Education. The report says 3.1 million Californians can't read well enough to understand advertising in newspapers, simple recipes or job applications. . . .

"These are people who might be able to read a simple sentence, but can't tell whether a lease they sign with their landlord is taking them to the cleaners," says Lynda Smith, a consultant on adult literacy for the state Department of Education. . . .

"It's a handicap people don't want to broadcast," Ms. Smith says. "There are people who can't read walking around in libraries carrying newspapers. They want to be seen reading."

So obviously, 1987 was a good time to change reading instruction in California's schools. Getting back to 1996, Ms. Stewart writes:

The situation has deteriorated so far that former state Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, who oversaw the creation of the 1987 reading framework, has distanced himself from it, calling the framework "fatally flawed for its failure to anticipate the whole-language overreaction."

Not only has Mr. Honig distanced himself from the fiasco, but he has undergone a complete conversion and now advocates a phonics approach. In fact, he has written a book on the subject entitled *Teaching Our Children to Read*, published by Corwin Press. But we warned him in our newsletter of Sept. 1988, in which we wrote:

Functional illiteracy will be booming in California in the years ahead if the state adopts the look-say basal reading programs it has already approved. . . . Because of textbook selection decisions based on ignorance, millions of California children will be condemned to lives as functional illiterates. Such state sanctioned educational malpractice will be doing more

damage to more lives than one can possibly calculate. . . . And so if parents in California want to make sure that their children learn to read, they will have to teach them at home or place them in private or religious schools with good phonics reading programs.

How is it that we were able to predict the disaster that lay ahead? And why is it that we who have this superior predictive ability are never called upon by the professional educators to help them make the right decisions? The reason is very simple. Stupid people rarely rely on people who know more than they do for fear that the smarter people will supplant them. And so, they go on making horrendous, tragic mistakes that harm millions of children simply because stupid people don't know or care what they are doing. Ms. Stewart writes:

Says Honig today: "Things got out of hand. School administrators and principals thought they were following the framework when they latched on to whole language, and our greatest mistake was failing to say, 'Look out for the crazy stuff, look out for the overreaction and the religiously anti-skills fanatics.' We totally misjudged which voices would take charge of the schools. We never dreamed it would be driven to this bizarre edge. When I tell people that we never even say the phrase 'whole language' anywhere in the 73-page document, they look at me like I'm mad."

And so, maybe Mr. Honig was not as incompetent as he was ignorant. It stands to reason that when you become Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of California and you decide to create a "reading framework" for the entire state school system, you'd better know something about what's going on in the field. The war between proponents of systematic phonics and those of the whole-word method has been going on at least since 1955 when *Why Johnny Can't Read* was first published. Is it possible that Mr. Honig was unaware of this war? He says he failed "to anticipate the whole-language overreaction." If that is indeed the case, then

Mr. Honig was clearly unqualified for the job as Superintendent.

The new Superintendent, Delaine Eastin, is trying to correct the situation. She wants to combine phonics with the good part of whole language: rich literature and early writing. Meanwhile, the legislators in Sacramento are expected to mandate the teaching of phonics in the grade schools. But what about all of those teachers who have been teaching whole language for the past eight years and have no idea how to teach intensive, systematic phonics even if they wanted to? Are they going to be retrained? And what is going to happen to all of those nonreaders in the upper grades? Will they all be remediated? The sheer cost of the literacy debacle will perhaps convince the legislators that they ought to test out all of these new education fads before implementing them.

## Whole Language Takes Over

How did whole language manage to take over California? According to the article it began in 1986 when Honig invited a select group of educators "to brainstorm about ways to set California on a new course in reading." Honig says, "I told them to dream, and to forget about any old rules that weren't working." And dream they did. Cal State Chico professor Jesus Cortez relates: "Somebody stood up and said that we were there to create a new generation of superior thinkers and readers and writers who would run the businesses and set the policies of the 21st century. Creating that new generation was the dominant theme from day one."

Not only were these people incompetent, but they were wacky visionaries as well! Stewart writes:

The secondary-school representatives emerged as natural leaders because they, more than anyone, were driven by tremendous frustration over skyrocketing drop-out rates, the hatred many teenagers ex-

pressed for reading, and the shocking levels of remedial reading required by California's college freshmen. . . . "They also knew that something had to be done about beginning grade school reading, but they weren't sure what."

Hadn't any of the dummies read *Why Johnny Can't Read* by Rudolf Flesch or Prof. Jeanne Chall's *The Great Debate: Learning to Read* or Sam Blumenfeld's *The New Illiterates*? Obviously not. Nor did anyone suggest investigating the many private schools where children were being taught to read quite successfully with a phonics program. They were just gung-ho on something new, anything new, as long as it sounded good. Ms. Stewart elaborates:

"The group was charting new ground, and we wanted an inspirational document," recalls Jerry Treadway, a textbook author and a professor at San Diego State. "I remember specific meetings at which Mel Grubb and other whole-language proponents convinced everyone that there was no distinction between learning how to read as a first-grader and the way a mature reader would handle the printed word. We decided that until we got kids to deal with language the way it is used by adults, as a whole thought, our reading programs wouldn't work. . . . We underwent a real interesting perceptual shift in the meetings, and what we finally stated, almost derisively, is that the traditional reading approach, the emphasis is on mere accuracy. We said, 'How absurd it is to care about individual words and accuracy!' Under whole language, the rule was efficiency of the mind: Get the meaning using the least perception possible. Skip words. Absorb ideas instead. At the time, it sounded great."

Am I exaggerating when I call these people incompetent? Not only incompetent, but obstinately so.

Ms. Stewart elaborates:

But tension began to arise over draft language that soft-pedaled the need to teach basic reading skills. . . . And the noted Harvard researcher and author Jean [sic] Chall warned the committee that it was ignoring major findings about how grade school children actually learn to read--by the careful decod-

ing of each and every letter and word. . . . But Chall was completely ignored.

We wonder how many on the committee had actually read Chall's book. In any case, the committee went whole hog for whole language when Francine Alexander, in charge of curriculum, proposed that the state adopt *Impressions*, Holt Canada's controversial whole-language story book. The idea of replacing the boring old primers with exciting "real literature" is what probably enthused the teachers most about whole language. The article continues:

Unfortunately, while the group pursued its ideas within this cloistered atmosphere of growing consensus, emerging research was showing that just the reverse was true about how children learn to read....

But while Honig and many skills-oriented members of the framework committee relied heavily upon *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, which confirmed the need for intensive decoding training for small children, the rest of the committee members were in the process of rejecting such research. Indeed, many on the committee began gathering material from theorists who supported their evolving views against teaching skills. Looking back, Honig says, "It is the curse of all progressives that we are anti-research and anti-science, and we never seem to grasp how irrational that attitude is. This is probably our deepest failure." . . .

In the end, the committee produced a thick document that was adopted by the state Board of Education and praised nationally on talk shows. Official textbooks were selected that were mostly literature; the book chosen by 80 percent of the school districts contained no lessons at all. Schools were expected to follow the new approach, and compliance officers began appearing in local classrooms.

Compliance officers? Sounds like something out of a police state. We thought that educators are strongly opposed to anything approaching "censorship," but here we have compliance officers making sure that teachers don't teach intensive phonics. The article continues:

The late 1980s and early 1990s were heady times

for whole language. An estimated 20,000 teachers took in-service classes or learned the new approach from mentors. Others paid \$650 to private trainers like Bob and Marlene McCracken, just two of a contingent of consultants who swarmed California. . . .

At California's 72 teacher colleges, meanwhile, a near-religious fervor took hold. Whole-language enthusiasts like Barbara Flores at Cal State San Bernardino began pushing the idea, via teacher-credentialing classes, that teaching phonics and other skills directly to children was actually bad for them. . . . By 1995, some 10,000 fresh new teachers had poured into grade schools, thousands of whom had little training in the usual methods for teaching reading to kids.

How much will the state of California have to pay to retrain its teachers to be able to teach intensive phonics? Will there be a retraining program at all?

It didn't take very long before the inadequacies of whole language became apparent. A grandmother by the name of Marion Joseph, a chief policy analyst under former state Superintendent Wilson Riles, found out by happenstance that the primary schools were no longer using primers. She contacted several teachers to find out what was going on. She relates, "I got, almost without exception, 'Oh my God, Marion, we are having a terrible time. The new reading method is not working.' If they tried to teach phonics or word attack skills to the kids who weren't getting it from the storybook and the invented writings, compliance officers came in from their district office and ordered a stop to it. It was terrible stuff, virtually a new religion, a cult."

Marion Joseph complained to Honig, and Honig began to talk to teachers and came to the conclusion that his reading framework had been "grossly misinterpreted."

In 1993, Honig was forced to resign after his conviction on conflict-of-interest charges. Ms. Stewart writes:

In the end, a rudderless group of state officials were left struggling to interpret a unique and untested reading philosophy that they themselves did

not understand. At the schools, deep divisions broke out as district bureaucrats began dictating bizarre orders to teachers and principals.

Meanwhile, teachers and administrators at Eagle Rock's Toland Way Elementary School in Los Angeles County decided to raise funds for spelling books since the state had not approved of any. Compliance officers got wind of what was going on and spent three days in Toland Way's classrooms observing the teachers. They were reprimanded for using spelling books!

Nevertheless, state education officials were dumbfounded in 1992 when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) announced that California's reading scores were among the worst in the nation. Ms. Stewart relates:

In response, a meeting of top state curriculum officials was called in 1993. There, whole-language proponents—including the powerful California Reading Association, the California Literature Project and several state officials—successfully deflected an attempt to re-emphasize basic skills in grade schools.

It was argued that teachers would "go nuts" if required to make another big change in teaching methods. However, in 1994, new NAEP scores revealed the depth of California's reading debate. Grade school reading levels were in a free fall, with California's fourth-graders beating only Louisiana and Guam.

The result is that California educators have spent the last year soul-searching and commiserating about the failure of their wonderful reading program. The article states:

Jerry Treadway, of San Diego State, recently became the most prominent whole-language proponent to publicly concede that whole-language theory was fundamentally flawed, even while several of its techniques, such as using rich literature and early writing, were good ideas that should be retained. . . . "I don't mind saying it has been a disaster, as long as

it's clear to everyone that it was done with the best of intentions by a lot of really committed people."

But that hasn't stopped whole-language fanatics from resisting efforts by California's department of education to implement a new reading program which stresses phonics and spelling. In fact, it is more than likely that the state's teachers colleges will resist changing their reading methodology courses and will instead remain faithful to whole language theory and practice. Thus, new teachers will continue to come out of these colleges with little or no knowledge of how to teach intensive phonics.

All of which means that the public schools of California cannot guarantee that any child will learn how to read phonetically within that system. And so, concerned parents will have to do the job themselves by homeschooling or by placing their children in private schools that know how to teach reading.

In the end, when the incompetent rule, the children suffer.

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## Californian Girl Commits Suicide Because of Dyslexia

Kari Jorgensen, 22, former basketball star on the Fresno State women's basketball team, committed suicide on Jan. 18, 1996, after struggling all her life with dyslexia. For Kari, the written word had become an insurmountable barrier to growth. According to the *Fresno Bee* of 1/23/96:

She dreaded this world of words. She feared it. She cursed it. But too many years went by masking her secret, too many days bottling her emotions. Kari Jorgensen could face no more tomorrows, so she took her own life. She was 22.

The depths of Kari Jorgensen's despair, her long struggle with dyslexia and, in recent months, with life without basketball are perplexing to her many friends,

teammates and acquaintances who never knew. They never knew Jorgensen did not join the Brownies organization as a girl because she could not memorize the motto. They never knew she worried about getting her drivers license because of the written test. . . .

Jorgensen's fear was the ridicule of others, so she turned to her ploys, anything to avoid the shame in her eyes. . . . But the trickery would never take away the sting within: Basketball did. The zeal with which she played the game, which she seemingly failed to expend in the classroom, became her escape. . . .

But when her California State University, Fresno, basketball eligibility ran dry, Jorgensen began taking a hard look at her life, a life where she could not run from her reading disorder. . . .

The words of her daughter keep spinning in Carolyn Brown's mind. "Kari would say, 'Mom, what am I going to do?' . . . I'd say, 'Kari, I'll always take care of you for the rest of your life.' I told her that whatever she did, happiness wasn't so much how much money you make. It was more than that." . . .

Family, friends and a community will be tormented by last Thursday, the day Kari Jorgensen was found hanging in a room in her home.

#### Comment:

God knows how many Karis have been created by California's primary reading programs. Most of these individuals will go through life crippled by the teaching methods used by teachers imbued "with the best of intentions" and the dumbest of brains. Much has been written about how reading disabilities and dyslexia affect the emotional lives of the victims. But, apparently, reading teachers are the last people to know or care about such things.

### Reading Skills Decline in Britain

The following is from the London *Daily Telegraph* of Nov. 28, 1995:

Alarming evidence of a sharp and accelerating drop in the reading abilities and overall educational attainment of 11-year-olds was published yesterday by Secondary Heads Association. A survey of nearly

500 state and independent secondary schools in England and Wales found that standards of reading, spelling, comprehension and literacy fell continuously between 1991 and last year.

Two earlier national studies showed that the average reading ability of seven-year-olds fell significantly between 1985 and 1991. The fall was widely attributed to "progressive" teaching. John Sutton, general secretary of the association, whose members run the majority of comprehensives, described the results as shocking and called for a "blitz on literacy" in primary schools.

The findings were based on the standard tests of reading, verbal and non-verbal reasoning administered by 90 per cent of secondary schools to teach new intake. . . .

Estelle Morris, one of Labour's education spokesmen, said: "The findings are an important warning of the need to raise standards—particularly in the Three Rs—in primary school. Unless we get the basics right at an early age, we cannot improve achievement in later years." . . .

Many secondary heads remarked on a deterioration in 11-year-old's behavior, confirming that children's experience of failure tends to be accompanied by high levels of disaffection and boredom.

#### Comment:

What is happening in Britain and the U.S. is also taking place in the rest of the English speaking world. The dumbing down process is being carried out to prepare children for the New World Order. In fact, the very same process is also taking place throughout the Western world via the United Nations educational arm, UNESCO. A new book, published in France, entitled *Machiavel pédagogue ou le ministère de la réforme pédagogique* (Machiavelli as Educator or The Ministry of Educational Reform) by Pascal Bernardin, documents what UNESCO has been doing in education to destroy Western Christian civilization through values and behavior modification and multiculturalism. In other words, the author found coming out of UNESCO all of the same pagan, socialist programs now being promoted in American schools. The book can be ordered from: Librairie La Proue, Escaliers du Marché 17,

1003 Lausanne, Switzerland. Price: 30 Swiss francs 10 centimes. You'll probably have to purchase a bank draft in Swiss francs when you mail your order.

## Steve Jobs on Computers and Education

Steve Jobs, legendary founder of Apple Computer, was interviewed in the February 1996 issue of *Wired* magazine. He was asked, "Could technology help by improving education?" His response was quite interesting:

I used to think that technology could help education. I've probably spearheaded giving away more computer equipment to schools than anybody else on the planet. But I've had to come to the inevitable conclusion that the problem is not one that technology can hope to solve. What's wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology. No amount of technology will make a dent.

It's a political problem. The problems are socio-political. The problems are the unions. You plot the growth of the NEA [National Education Association] and the dropping of SAT scores, and they're inversely proportional. The problem is bureaucracy. I'm one of these people who believes the best thing we could ever do is go to the full voucher system.

I have a 17-year-old daughter who went to a private school for a few years before high school. This private school is the best school I've seen in my life. It was judged one of the 100 best schools in America. It was phenomenal. The tuition was \$5,500 a year, which is a lot of money for most parents. But the teachers were paid less than public school teachers—so it's not about money at the teacher level. I asked the state treasurer that year what California pays on average to send kids to school, and I believe it was \$4,400. While there are not many parents who could come up with \$5,500 a year, there are many who could come up with \$1,000 a year.

If we gave vouchers to parents for \$4,400 a year, schools would be starting right and left. People would get out of college and say, "Let's start a school." You could have a track at Stanford within the MBA program on how to be the business-person of a school. And that MBA would get together with somebody else, and they'd start schools. And you'd have these young, idealistic people starting schools, working for

pennies.

They'd do it because they'd be able to set the curriculum. When you have kids you think, What exactly do I want them to learn? Most of the stuff they study in school is completely useless. But some incredibly valuable things you don't learn until you're older—yet you could learn them when you're younger. And you start to think, What would I do if I set a curriculum for a school?

God, how exciting that could be! But you can't do it today. You don't get to do what you want. You don't get to pick your books, your curriculum. You get to teach one narrow specialization. Who would ever want to do that?

There are solutions to our problems in education. Unfortunately, technology isn't it. You're not going to solve the problems by putting all knowledge onto CD-ROMs. We can put a Web site in every school—none of this is bad. It's bad only if it lulls us into thinking we're doing something to solve the problem with education.

Lincoln did not have a Web site at the log cabin where his parents homeschooled him, and he turned out pretty interesting. Historical precedent shows that we can turn out amazing human beings without technology. Precedent also shows that we can turn out very uninteresting human beings with technology.

It's not as simple as you think when you're in your 20s—that technology's going to change the world. In some ways it will, in some ways it won't.

## Study Links Alzheimer's with Linguistic Ability

According to the *Boston Globe* of 2/21/96, researchers have found that individuals with greater linguistic ability in early life are better able to resist Alzheimer's disease in later life than those with weak linguistic ability. This finding is the result of a study of nuns who are donating their brains to science.

The study analyzed nuns' youthful writings and found that those who showed low linguistic ability in their 20s had a much higher risk of Alzheimer's when they were elderly. The findings could indicate that Alzheimer's impairs language ability when



people are young, the researchers said. On the other hand, greater linguistic ability early in life might indicate a healthy brain resistance to Alzheimer's later on.

"It's a chicken-or-an-egg thing at this point," said the lead researcher, David A. Snowden, an associate professor of preventive medicine at the University of Kentucky. The findings appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The researchers studied the autobiographies of 104 nuns from the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The order's 678 nuns have agreed to donate their brains for the federally funded research. The women wrote one-page accounts of their lives for the archives just before taking their vows, at an average age of 22.

Scientists autopsied the brains of 25 nuns who died, 10 of whom had Alzheimer's. Those who had low linguistic ability when young had abundant neurofibrillary tangles—the lesions of Alzheimer's disease—when they were old. Nine of the 10 nuns who developed Alzheimer's disease—90 percent—showed a low linguistic ability in their autobiographies, compared with only 13 percent among those who did not have Alzheimer's. Linguistic ability was measured by two traits—grammatical complexity and idea density, or the number of ideas per number of words.

#### Comment:

The researchers should ask the nuns how they were taught to read back in their primary schools—by intensive phonics or look-say. Obviously, look-say produces lower linguistic ability, while intensive phonics produces higher linguistic ability. When one thinks of the Founding Fathers, many of whom lived well into their seventies and eighties, we see them writing letters of great linguistic complexity right up to their

deaths. In fact, there are no indications that any of these illustrious individuals became feeble-minded as they got older. We know that look-say and whole language produce all kinds of reading and learning problems very early in life. Is it not possible that these faulty teaching methods can actually set the stage for Alzheimer's in later life? One thing we do know is that Alzheimer's is much more common today than it was years ago, when phonics was the prevalent method of teaching reading.

### 1 in 5 Mass. Adults Functionally Illiterate

Nearly one in five Massachusetts adults — totaling 877,000 — is functionally illiterate, according to a new state Board of Education report. Another 1.2 million adults would have difficulty passing a high-school English test, the report said. Lack of room in adult education classes for many who want to conquer illiteracy is part of the problem.

"We firmly believe that the scope of the challenge cannot deter us from taking the important steps recommended in this report," said Dr. Jerome Grossman, chairman of the state Board of Education's Adult Education Committee.

"Truthfully, the number of illiterate people doesn't vary much in any part of the country," Roberta Soolman, president of the Mass. Coalition for Adult Education, told reporters. "When you're dealing with so many people, you're dealing with all segments of the population." Soolman said it gets harder for adults to learn to read with passing years.

"There's quite often a great deal of embarrassment or fear of going into an educational setting where they've failed before," she said. (*Boston Herald*, 9/15/95)