

# How California Educators Created an Educational Disaster

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By Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld

California has probably produced more educational failures than any other state in the union. Why? Well, let's be blunt. They have the stupidest educators and politicians in the country. And this has been going on for a long time. Back in 1988, when Bill Honig, then-School Superintendent of California, and Francie Alexander, the state's curriculum director, chose only whole-language reading programs for the state's public schools, we knew that a literacy disaster was in store for the Golden State.

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Indeed, we wrote in our newsletter of Sept. 1988: "Functional illiteracy will be booming in California in the years ahead if that 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."

It was already known in 1987 that California had a serious reading problem. According to the Quincy (Mass.) *Patriot Ledger* of November 18, 1987:

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 U.S. 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. ...The largest group of illiterates is white. More than 43 percent of the group are white, and 56 percent were U.S.-born.

Naturally, the educators saw nothing in the schools to blame for this terrible situation. To them, the reasons for all of that functional illiteracy were obviously social. So when it came to adopting new reading programs in 1988, the educators of California ignored everything that had been written about the reading problem since 1955, when Rudolf Flesch's famous *Why Johnny Can't Read* was published, and acted as if nobody knew what caused perfectly normal children in school to become reading failures. But 40 years after Flesch, in 1995, the educators began to see the light, albeit somewhat dimly. In an article entitled "Rethinking Reading," in the August 1995 issue of *Teacher* magazine, we learn:

Dismal test scores and recent research that warns against a single approach to instruction have spurred California educational officials to rethink their state's pioneering techniques for teaching young children to read.

Pioneering techniques? Obviously, none of these so-called educators knew anything about the history of reading reform in the United States. The whole-language method of teaching was described by Edmund

Burke Huey in his "pioneering" book, *The Pedagogy and Psychology of Reading*, published in 1908. The progressives used it as a blueprint for dumbing down the American people, which was advocated by John Dewey in his 1898 essay, "The Primary-Education Fetish," in which he outlined a plan to reduce high literacy in America by using a whole-word method of teaching reading. The article continues:

The education department currently is drafting guidelines to help schools make the shift to the new wedded approach. . . . "Our goal is not to go back to one or push for the other," says Dennis Parker, manager of language arts and foreign languages for the state education department. "Our goal is to put together a comprehensive program that will work for every child."

The "wedded approach" was an attempt to create a balanced, middle-of-the-road system by blending whole language with phonics. Of course, it didn't work because it completely confused the children by expecting them to develop two opposing reflexes: a whole-word reflex and a phonetic reflex. Dr. Ivan Pavlov proved in his Moscow laboratory that introducing conflicting reflexes produces behavioral neurosis. The article informs us:

California adopted the whole language framework for teaching language arts in 1987. . . . Diana Garchow, a veteran teacher and a member of the state's new reading task force, says administrators in some California schools actually seized all phonics books and spellers to ensure that teachers were not ignoring the new instructional framework. In their place, she adds, "we got some beautiful pieces of literature that the children can't read." . . .

Bill Honig, who was the state superintendent when the literature-based program was adopted, now concedes that the framework was fuzzy. "We made our mistakes because we weren't clear enough about this being a balanced approach," he says. . . .

Still, there are those who worry that the pendulum may swing too far away from the whole language emphasis, for reasons that have little to do with best practice. Mary Ellen Vogt, a board member of the International Reading Association and a past president of the IRA's California affiliate, is one of them. "The teaching of phonics is compatible with literature-based instruction," Vogt says. "Keeping that in balance is the trick."

The fact that so-called balance creates what Pavlov called behavioral neurosis does not ring any bells in the heads of our educators. Ms. Vogt is more worried about the pendulum than the well-being of the children. Their ability to become good readers has nothing to do with pendulums. It has to do with using the proper phonetic methods.

Note that Dr. Honig admits that they were the victims of "fuzzy thinking." It wasn't fuzzy thinking; it was stupid, ignorant thinking, made by people who should never have been given the authority to decide how to teach anybody anything in a classroom.

In case you don't know what whole language is all about and why it has caused educational disasters not only in California but also where it has been used elsewhere, here is a definition of this teaching method given by three whole-language professors in their book, *Whole Language, What's the Difference?*, published in 1991 (p.32):

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the words," whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings . . . Meaning is created through a transaction with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning).

It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning from the print, in the sense that the reader-created meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers . . . Although students who learn to read in whole language classrooms are, like all proficient readers, eventually able to "read" (or identify) a large inventory of words, learning words is certainly not the goal of whole language.

The purpose of all that pedagogical gobbledegook was, and still is, to convince people such as Bill Honig that whole language is worth spending millions of dollars on and that they should not worry about whether or not it will teach millions of young Californians to read. It didn't occur to him or his colleagues to try it out on one class before saddling the entire system with it. But that's typical of our educators. Try it out on everybody and see if it works. If not, too bad for all of those functional illiterates who will spend

the rest of their lives handicapped by what was done to them in their benign public schools.

And who gets punished for this crime? Nobody. Meanwhile, in character with past ignorant practices, Gov. Jerry Brown is proposing to eliminate a second year of science from the state's requirements for high-school graduation. High-tech companies are crying out for more science and math in the schools, but the Governor isn't listening. He doesn't seem to care if any of these graduates can go on to college and become eligible for the high-tech jobs that will be available. According to international testing, American students are far behind other nations in math and science. But apparently, Gov. Brown would rather use the money needed for a second year in science for something else. Or maybe nothing else.

What it all adds up to is a government education system that is turning out poorly- and wrongly-educated students, and an alarming percentage of functional illiterates. Parents who want a decent education for their children will have to seek alternatives, including homeschooling. But the Establishment Behemoth must be fed, regardless of whether or not it actually educates.

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*Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld is the author of eight books on education, including: Is Public Education Necessary?, NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education, The Whole Language/OBE Fraud and Homeschooling: A Parents Guide to Teaching Children. His books are available on Amazon.com. Back issues of his incisive newsletter, The Blumenfeld Education Letter, are available online. This article originally appeared in The New American and is reprinted with permission.*

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[Eagle Forum](#) PO Box 618 Alton, IL 62002 phone: 618-462-5415 fax: 618-462-8909

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