

February 15, 1973

To: Byron Dobell

From: Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Re: Article on why New York City schools can't teach children to read properly

The attached clippings from The New York Times will give you an idea of how serious the reading problem is in the New York City schools. The article I propose doing for New York would tell why this situation exists and how it can be remedied. I would apply to the New York City situation the knowledge I gained in writing my book, THE NEW ILLITERATES, which will be published later this year by Arlington House.

In the course of researching the book, I made a fantastic discovery: that for the last forty years the normal children of America have been taught to read by a method (sight vocabulary) originally conceived and used in the early 1800's to teach the deaf how to read, a method which has long since been discarded by the teachers of the deaf themselves as inadequate and outmoded. Yet, today, the vast majority of normal American children are still being taught to read by this method. The result has been widespread dyslexia, reading disability, and a functional illiteracy problem among young adults on the order of a national disaster.

In writing this book, I also made painstaking analyses of the major reading instruction textbooks now being used in American classrooms. Such analyses, as far as I have been able to determine, have never been made before. What I uncovered, in the process, was educational malpractice on a scale that is somewhat incredible.

What I want to do for the proposed article is find out how the children of New York are being taught to read, what textbooks are being used, and why reading failure is quite predictable on the basis of the teaching methods being used. I will particularly investigate the textbooks and methods being used in the

schools with the lowest reading scores and contrast this with the textbooks and methods being used in the schools with the highest scores. I will also delve into the matter of how textbooks are selected and on what basis the teaching methods have been adopted. I think the result will be a stimulating, controversial article -- concerning widespread educational malpractice within the schools of New York -- which will arouse long, continued discussion. Most important of all, I will prove that the reading problem in New York does not defy solution.

Times Company

N1

DECLINE CONTINUES IN READING ABILITY OF PUPILS IN CITY

Scribner Says the Problem
Defies Simple Solutions—
Urges Tough Reforms

By LEONARD BUDER

The reading ability of city pupils continued to decline last year, according to a report sent to the Board of Education by School Chancellor Harvey B. Scribner.

The report, which ranked the city schools on the basis of pupils' scores on reading tests given last spring, showed that in only 163 of the system's 632 elementary schools and in only 24 of the 158 intermediate and junior high schools were at least half the pupils reading at or above the norm or standard for their grade.

The previous year's report, based on 1971 test results, showed that in 172 of the then total of 626 elementary schools and in 33 of the 155 middle schools at least half the pupils were at or above grade in reading.

New Attitude Urged

Dr. Scribner, commenting on the report in an interview, said that the problem of reading retardation was "not serious" and defied simple solutions. He noted that the problem was not confined to New York City but was generally typical of all large urban centers.

He said that although the city system has increased its efforts to overcome the problem, it had failed to make much headway because these efforts had been largely of a traditional nature, embodying, as he said, "a long-overlooked attitude of teachers and administrators."

He said that the new attitude in teaching and the way of the kids had a new attitude on the part of the staff. He said, "We have to place our emphasis on kids learning rather than teachers teaching."

This, he continued, will require "hard-nosed reform" of conventional school programs and practices and cannot be achieved easily or quickly.

More Teachers Hired

Even so, he said, the system is making some progress, although it may take a while for the results to become evident. He said that the Learning Cooperative, set up a year ago to generate education reforms by the decentralized local districts, was identifying and disseminating information about successful school practices.

The school-ranking report, which is required under the 1969 school decentralization law, lists every elementary, intermediate and junior high school in the city according to its proportion of pupils reading at or above grade level. Those

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schools that rank in the bottom 45 per cent in terms of pupil reading achievement are, under the decentralization law, eligible to fill teacher vacancies outside the normal selection and appointment processes.

Local districts with "eligible" schools may if they wish, hire for these schools new teachers who hold only a state certificate, or who have passed the National Teacher Examination or a special qualifying examination given by the system's Board of Examiners.

No figures could be obtained last week on how many new teachers had been hired through these alternative procedures in the last two years, although an unofficial estimate held that several thousand had been.

The new reading report, sent to the board last week but not yet officially made public, found 255 elementary schools and 71 intermediate and junior high schools eligible for alternative teaching-hiring procedures.

Elementary schools that are eligible this year have fewer than 29 per cent of their total student body reading at or above grade. The 1971 cut-off figure was 31.2 per cent at or above grade. The lower 1972 figure is an indication of the generally lower reading scores last spring.

Eligible intermediate and junior high schools this year have fewer than 18 per cent of their pupils at or above grade. Last year's cut-off figure was 21.9 per cent.

The reading tests used by the city system are standardized nationally for comparative purposes. In an "average" school or system, 50 per cent of the pupils would score at or above grade and 50 per cent would score below grade. The 1971 test scores showed that 66 per cent of the city's pupils were below grade; comparative figures for 1972 have not yet been released.

(CONT'D)

Findings Summarized

An analysis of the new report shows, as expected, that the schools with the highest proportion of youngsters passing at or above grade are generally those in white middle-class neighborhoods — such as the Whitestone area of Queens and the Riverdale section of the Bronx — and that those with the lowest proportions are in poor neighborhoods.

Dr. Scribner, in a memorandum to the board summarizing the report's findings, said that District 23, which covers the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, was the "worst" district in the city in terms of reading achievement, with every elementary school there eligible to qualify for alternative teacher-appointment methods.

Other "poor" reading districts, according to the Chancellor, were District 1, which comprises the Lower East Side; District 4, East Harlem; District 6, Inwood and Washington Heights; District 7, South Bronx; District 9, Morrisania; District 13, Brooklyn Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant; and District 14, Williamsburg and Greenpoint. These districts had a preponderance of "eligible" schools.

The "best" districts — those that had no elementary schools eligible — were District 25, Flushing and College Point; District 26, Bayside and Douglaston; and District 29, Queens Village and Springfield Gardens, all in Queens.

The report on school rankings was prepared by the Bureau of Educational Research, headed by Dr. David A. Abramson. A second reading report, one which will give the actual reading achievement scores by grades for every school in the city, is to be issued within the next few weeks.

Headquarters officials emphasized that school rankings or individual reading scores should not be used to make comparisons between schools because a number of factors can affect reading achievement.

A pupil being aided by teacher. New report says city's public school students' reading ability continues decline.

Grade School Rankings

Following is a table showing the ranking of elementary schools by district as measured by the citywide reading tests given last spring. The percentages show the portion of pupils in each school at or above grade level. According to national standards, the average school would have half its pupils at or above grade and half below.

DISTRICT GUIDE

Manhattan

- 1 Lower East Side
- 2 Lower West Side, East Midtown
- 3 Lower and Upper Park West
- 4 East Harlem
- 5 Central Harlem
- 6 Inwood, Washington Heights

Bronx

- 7 South Bronx
- 8 Glason Point, Throgs Neck
- 9 Concourse
- 10 Fordham, Riverdale

Brooklyn

- 11 Williamsbridge, North Bronx
- 12 Morrisania
- 13 Brooklyn Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant
- 14 Williamsburg, Greenpoint
- 15 South Brooklyn, Park Slope
- 16 Bushwick, Ridgewood
- 17 Crown Heights, Flatbush
- 18 Canarsa, East Flatbush
- 19 East New York
- 20 Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst
- 21 Gravesend, Coney Island
- 22 Midwood, Sheepshead Bay
- 23 Brownsville

Queens

- 24 Maspeth, Middle Village
- 25 Flushing, College Point
- 26 Rego, Douglaston
- 27 Richmond Hill, South, Rockaway
- 28 Forest Hills, Jamaica
- 29 Queens Village, Springfield Gardens
- 30 Astoria, Woodside
- 31 Entire borough

Scribner Reports Reading Ability of Pupils in the City Continues to Decline

MANHATTAN		BRONX		BROOKLYN		DISTRICT 19		DISTRICT 20	
DISTRICT 1	DISTRICT 2	DISTRICT 7	DISTRICT 8	DISTRICT 13	DISTRICT 14	Sch.	%	Sch.	%
Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	273	52.3	127	64.3
110 29.2	158 75.2	31 41.3	71 46.7	9 30.3	237 54.4	306 40.3	247 60.7	104 54.4	102 54.2
19 28.5	49 72.2	49 32.3	72 43.1	8 30.0	132 29.7	250 34.8	104 54.4	102 54.2	186 52.5
137 25.4	6 29.0	27 22.6	14 34.9	44 27.7	110 25.9	171 30.7	186 52.5	200 51.2	205 50.2
34 24.5	79 45.9	124 22.6	93 32.4	3 26.2	59 28.6	234 25.6	185 48.1	170 48.2	204 48.0
63 20.0	153 85.4	43 29.9	138 32.2	20 25.6	24 24.1	214 24.5	213 20.4	112 44.1	163 41.4
160 18.7	190 84.8	1 19.7	119 30.5	11 22.0	16 23.1	108 24.4	159 30.2	48 42.0	179 41.1
134 18.5	3 62.4	161 19.4	69 29.9	93 21.7	250 22.6	137 18.8	149 11.5	192 34.1	180 36.1
97 17.8	5 62.4	40 13.5	100 22.0	54 19.4	147 21.9	158 10.9	113 10.8	164 24.1	140 16.1
20 17.3	26 58.2	157 16.3	146 28.3	307 19.3	23 20.5	182 17.8	76 16.0	345 13.9	202 12.7
140 17.2	41 55.9	18 17.0	107 27.5	205 19.1	118 20.4	202 12.7	149 11.5	63 11.0	158 10.9
122 15.2	198 43.1	154 10.9	45 27.0	66 17.9	122 19.6	113 10.8	81 13.0	120 13.7	31 17.7
61 13.3	130 32.7	5 16.7	140 26.2	133 17.5	147 15.3	174 9.2	100 78.1	209 57.6	128 56.3
188 13.0	1 32.5	29 16.1	36 23.7	256 17.5	78 16.3	215 53.2	99 51.5	216 51.2	153 51.1
4 12.3	23 32.3	30 18.9	130 21.0	287 16.3	106 13.6	153 51.1	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9
64 10.4	116 32.0	65 12.4	232 16.3	282 16.1	84 13.0	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9	177 47.2
15 9.6	33 29.7	37 9.5	60 14.1	67 14.8	120 13.7	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	11 28.1	51 7.4	75 12.5	46 14.6	163 12.4	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	2 27.4	25 4.9	39 11.0		31 17.7	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	126 25.6		62 10.4		19 5.0	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	111 24.8					106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	51 22.2					106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	151 21.6					106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
	42 18.5					106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
DISTRICT 3	DISTRICT 4	DISTRICT 9	DISTRICT 10	DISTRICT 15	DISTRICT 18	DISTRICT 21		DISTRICT 22	
Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	%	Sch. %	%
166 48.5	112 32.2	83 34.6	24 80.6	130 45.2	335 77.7	100 78.1	236 77.7	236 77.7	236 77.7
75 47.3	102 22.3	110 28.7	81 76.0	230 40.3	262 77.7	209 57.6	251 76.1	251 76.1	251 76.1
87 36.3	146 22.1	2 26.9	8 27.5	39 37.4	243 32.3	128 56.3	119 71.1	119 71.1	119 71.1
191 33.5	57 19.4	70 26.8	95 31.2	131 29.3	40 32.3	238 55.0	195 71.1	195 71.1	195 71.1
84 31.2	101 18.5	114 22.2	94 43.3	321 28.7	123 28.7	215 53.2	312 71.1	312 71.1	312 71.1
208 28.8	107 18.2	35 21.7	7 42.3	55 26.6	21 21.0	99 51.5	197 70.1	207 69.1	193 65.5
199 28.4	80 17.5	125 18.5	46 40.7	29 27.3	274 24.6	216 51.2	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9
185 26.7	171 17.0	42 18.7	122 40.4	169 25.8	81 21.0	153 51.1	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9
113 25.9	7 16.3	33 25.5	86 39.9	94 25.8	5 21.0	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9	177 47.2
9 25.3	121 16.8	26 23.4	56 38.5	261 24.9	107 21.1	101 51.0	129 50.2	87 45.9	177 47.2
180 22.8	108 16.5	9 23.2	33 25.5	10 18.9	1 21.0	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
144 21.3	83 16.3	11 17.7	26 23.4	15 18.1	10 18.9	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
145 21.1	168 15.8	85 21.7	26 23.4	154 18.0	15 18.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
163 18.3	206 15.6	59 21.7	26 23.4	27 16.8	28 17.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
76 18.4	96 13.4	32 18.4	26 23.4	32 16.2	28 17.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
207 16.6	109 12.9	91 18.6	26 23.4	38 15.6	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
179 16.0	155 11.2			124 14.3	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
165 14.3	72 8.3			172 9.5	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
149 11.2					106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1	106 19.1
DISTRICT 5	DISTRICT 6	DISTRICT 11	DISTRICT 12	DISTRICT 17	DISTRICT 18	DISTRICT 23		DISTRICT 24	
Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	Sch. %	%	Sch. %	%
36 45.3	187 51.5	181 63.2	47 44.4	91 31.4	276 75.3	173 27.5	125 17.1	125 17.1	125 17.1
156 43.8	152 34.0	85 82.5	102 41.8	241 39.0	115 74.8	165 25.3	294 16.9	294 16.9	294 16.9
68 41.7	132 30.3	178 61.7	224 36.2	161 37.5	279 80.3	298 23.2	137 16.8	137 16.8	137 16.8
154 29.6	173 28.8	19 39.2	20 33.7	249 28.6	111 82.1	396 22.9	327 15.4	327 15.4	327 15.4
123 26.4	186 28.6	68 53.0	77 28.3	181 30.7	77 28.3	213 21.3	47 14.8	47 14.8	47 14.8
161 25.3	189 26.4	76 51.9	77 28.3	92 24.4	208 24.4	183 18.4	156 13.1	156 13.1	156 13.1
125 24.0	28 26.2	17 49.4	102 41.8	221 28.0	212 41.3	41 17.5	150 12.9	150 12.9	150 12.9
197 23.7	98 25.7	41 48.5	102 41.8	138 26.7	135 40.1	73 17.3	144 12.9	144 12.9	144 12.9
79 23.7	128 24.4	47 47.8	102 41.8	189 24.7	235 36.1	184 17.1	155 12.3	155 12.3	155 12.3
175 23.2	192 18.9	57 20.3	102 41.8	289 31.2	244 28.3		178 11.7	178 11.7	178 11.7
200 23.0	115 15.7	67 19.0	102 41.8	316 21.1	219 27.9				
30 22.7		50 18.7	102 41.8	167 30.0	268 27.0				
92 21.6		92 22.2	102 41.8	191 16.7					
129 21.3		22 15.9	102 41.8						
46 20.0		61 15.3	102 41.8						
133 19.1		150 14.4	102 41.8						
194 17.5		23 14.1	102 41.8						
100 15.9		311 13.3	102 41.8						
31 7.1		66 13.1	102 41.8						
		129 13.1	102 41.8						
		34 12.0	102 41.8						
		54 8.4	102 41.8						
		78 34.3	102 41.8						
		103 31.0	102 41.8						
		112 25.6	102 41.8						

QUEENS

[illegible]

RICHMOND

Sch.	DISTRICT	
	Pop.	Sch.
35	719	11
42	719	45
23	706	510
4	679	535
32	662	52
48	619	19
50	613	437
29	613	38
22	636	463
53	636	14
8	622	14
26	622	13
55	618	40
36	613	20
54	596	305
30	593	369
3	579	46
22	578	353
5	563	44
		119
		16
		31
		12
		307
		302
		31
		18
		263

Ranking of City's Junior High Schools

School	Dist.	%	School	Dist.	%	School	Dist.	%
190	28	69.3	227	20	28.4	162	16	11.4
216	26	69.5	229	20	28.0	120	18	11.0
141	10	66.2	166	19	26.9	68	3	11.0
75	25	64.9	143	6	27.2	218	14	10.8
172	26	63.5	143	6	27.2	60	1	10.8
67	26	62.6	143	6	27.2	117	4	10.8
194	25	62.6	143	6	27.2	13	3	9.0
78	22	61.4	131	8	27.1	238	13	9.8
68	18	60.4	131	8	27.0	23	9	9.7
17	31	59.0	131	8	27.0	201	15	9.7
237	31	58.9	131	8	27.0	115	9	9.4
237	25	58.9	201	30	27.1	115	24	9.2
231	29	58.3	232	13	26.9	136	12	9.1
278	22	57.7	192	14	26.9	117	17	8.9
183	25	57.7	192	29	26.8	71	14	8.6
158	26	57.6	66	2	19.7	62	14	8.6
180	11	57.6	66	2	19.6	45	4	8.4
71	26	57.4	79	10	19.6	26	19	8.3
218	25	56.8	171	10	18.0	26	2	8.1
157	28	55.7	61	17	17.1	92	19	8.0
14	24	53.7	117	9	16.1	120	5	7.9
105	23	53.4	218	19	15.8	2	8	7.8
168	23	53.4	164	6	15.3	62	11	7.7
105	22	50.7	123	8	15.3	111	16	7.7
125	11	50.1	13	10	15.4	136	5	7.5
240	31	49.5	13	5	15.2	13	4	7.5
51	21	49.3	201	5	15.2	99	12	7.4
119	24	48.9	52	6	15.2	142	15	7.3
2	31	48.9	117	7	14.8	133	19	7.3
43	21	48.3	112	10	14.8	202	12	7.2
211	18	47.8	43	3	14.8	151	7	7.1
62	20	46.9	88	15	14.7	57	16	6.9
189	25	46.7	220	17	14.5	50	14	6.7
303	24	45.9	143	9	14.1	108	10	6.5
143	10	44.5	84	21	13.8	99	4	6.2
227	18	44.0	239	21	13.7	211	21	6.1
285	18	43.9	8	13	13.1	49	11	6.0
180	27	43.9	51	12	12.1	49	19	5.7
202	27	43.7	44	1	12.1	61	7	5.7
259	30	43.7	22	5	12.1	139	14	5.5
281	21	43.7	294	13	11.9	33	1	5.5
144	24	42.2	162	7	11.6	148	23	4.7
109	24	41.9	136	15	11.4	263	23	4.5
167	2	40.7	136	15	11.4	35	23	4.5
145	30	40.2						
228	21	39.7						
125	24	38.1						
93	24	39.0						
70	2	37.9						
201	20	37.5						
127	11	37.2						
72	28	36.7						
96	21	36.6						
141	30	36.0						
49	31	35.3						
231	29	35.1						
59	29	34.8						
80	10	34.4						
210	27	34.4						
217	28	34.1						
101	8	34.1						
61	31	33.6						
126	30	32.0						
198	30	31.5						
113	11	30.8						
10	30	29.7						
61	24	29.7						
142	11	28.4						
223	20	26.7						