WHY AMERICAN SCHOOLS CAN'T TEACH CHILDREN TO READ

by

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It's been twenty-seven years since Rudolf Flesch first informed Americans that they had a serious reading problem via his famous book, Why Johnny Can't Read. Flesch had written the book to explain to an ignorant and somewhat baffled public why more and more primary-school children were having enormous difficulties learning to read, difficulties that parents had begun to notice and complain about in the 1940's. The incisive, Vienna-born author was quite blunt in identifying the cause of the problem:

"The teaching of reading," he wrote, "all over the United States, in all the schools, and in all the textbooks -- is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

He then went on to explain that from about 1930 to 1950, beginning reading instruction in American schools had been radically changed by the professors of education from the traditional alphabetic-phonics method to a new whole-word,

or hieroglyphic, method. Written English was no longer taught as a sound-symbol system but as an ideographic system, like the Chinese. This was news to a lot of parents who assumed that their children were being taught to read the way they had been taught. How else could you possibly learn to read? they wondered.

The educators tried to explain their new approach. One of the first explainers was Dr. Arthur I. Gates, the professor of education at Columbia Teachers College whose research was instrumental in getting schools to adopt the new method. He wrote an article in Parents magazine of April 1931 entitled "New Ways of Teaching Reading." The magazine explained: "Parents puzzled by modern methods of teaching will find this article helpful." In it, Gates characterized the new whole-word method as "natural" and "undistorted," the old alphabetic method as "barren" and "formal." It all sounded wonderfully progressive and it was also good sales promotion for the new reading instruction materials that Gates was creating for Macmillan. In January 1935, Parents published another article to quell the concerns of parents whose little Johnnies were fumbling and stumbling in primary reading. The article, entitled "How Children Are Learning to Read," explained:

> When you and I went to school we learned to read in the following order: alphabet, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. Today, more rather than less attention is given to each of these steps, but the order is exactly reversed. This change has come about after a careful analysis of what constitutes effective reading in the intermediate and upper grades and in adult life.

That "careful analysis" was not the work of primary school teachers who had taught reading for twenty years, but of professors of education who had never faced

a classroom of six-year-olds in their lives. It was only natural that their "research" would tend to confirm their preconceived notions. It took minds of consummate illogic to assume that by reversing the natural order of instruction in primary reading you would improve the pupils' performances. In practice, of course, the very opposite occurred. But rather than admit that their methods were at fault, the professors of education began to find all sorts of things wrong with the kids.

Probably the most energetic investigator of "reading disabilities" was Professor William S. Gray of the University of Chicago's School of Education and chief author of the Dick and Jane basal reading instruction program, the first edition of which was published in 1930. The new method was causing all kinds of learning problems. But that hardly fazed the professor who, in an article in the Elementary English Review of April 1935, dispassionately listed all of the things wrong with the little darlings who couldn't hack the new whole-word method: mental deficiency or retardation, defective vision, auditory deficiencies, congenital word blindness, developmental alexia, congenital alexia, congenital aphasia, dyslexia, strephosymbolia, cerebral dominance, ambidexterity, and emotional instability.

In the ensuing years, other educational researchers in the professional journals added their own exotic terms to the growing lexicon of reading-disability diseases: binocular imbalance, lateral dominance, word-deafness, acuity dominance, sinistral and mixed manual-ocular behavior, eye-muscle imbalance, poor fusion, ocular blocks, endocrine disturbances, lateral preferences, vertical rotation in visual-motor performance, perceptual retardation, dyslexaphoria, monocular vision, neural confusion, ocular-manual laterality, sociopathic tendencies, prenatal and paranatal factors, social maladjustment and, when everything else failed, minimal brain damage.

What were the cures recommended for these horrible diseases? Life magazine, in a major article on dyslexia in 1944, described the cure recommended by the Dyslexia Institute at Northwestern University for one little girl with an I.Q. of 118: thyroid treatments, removal of tonsils and adenoids, exercises to strengthen her eye muscles. It's a wonder they didn't recommend a prefrontal lobotomy.

While Flesch was the first to find fault with the educators instead of the children, he was not the first to question the soundness of their new method or confront them with its potentially harmful effects. The first to do that was Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist, who, in 1929, published an article in Educational Psychology reporting that there was a large group of children who could not learn to read via the new whole-word method. He warned that this method "may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far-reaching damage to their emotional life."

Orton had discovered all of this in the 1920s while investigating cases of reading disability in Iowa, where the new method was being widely used. But the professors of education decided that Orton didn't know much about education and went ahead with their plans to publish the new basal reading programs. Later they made use of Orton's own medical diagnoses and terminology to identify what was wrong with the kids having trouble learning to read. But they never admitted that it was the teaching method that caused these problems to develop.

So, as early as 1929, the educators had had some warning from a prominent physician that the new whole-word method could cause serious reading disability. Despite this, the new basal reading programs turned out to be huge commercial successes as whole school districts switched over to Dick and Jane, Alice and

Jerry, Janet and Mark, Jimmy and Sue, Tom and Betty and other whole-word basal series which were earning millions of dollars in royalties for their professor-of-education authors.

By the 1940s, schools everywhere were setting up remedial reading departments and reading clinics to handle the thousands of children with reading problems. In fact, remedial teaching had blossomed into a whole new educational specialty with its own professional status, and educational research on reading problems had become a new growth industry.

With the boom in remedial teaching also came the creation of professional organizations to deal with it. In 1946 two remedial teachers, Elva Knight and Marion Kingsbury, founded the National Association for Remedial Teaching. Its presidents included such whole-word luminaries as William S. Gray, Helen M. Robinson, George Spache and Ruth Strang. A second organization, the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction, was founded in 1948 at Temple University. Its list of presidents included Nila B. Smith, A. J. Harris, Paul Witty, and William S. Gray, all of whom were professors of education and authors or editors of best-selling whole-word basal reading systems. Both organizations held annual conventions, published bulletins, and provided publishers the opportunities to exhibit their wares.

At this point, one might ask, how could the professors get away with this blatant educational malpractice in a free country where parents and elected representatives are supposed to have ultimate control over the public schools? Flesch gave the answer:

> It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teachers' college or school of education; every

> teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; everyone of these textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

Apparently, state monopoly education, even without a dictatorship, is quite capable of stifling dissent. In the matter of reading instruction, what we have had to contend with is a private monopoly within a state-controlled and regulated system created by professors of education with a strong economic and professional interest in pushing and keeping their textbooks and methodology in the schools. The state system made it easy for them to create this monopoly and maintain it indefinitely. Teacher certification laws require that young teachers be trained by these educators, who not only prepare the curriculum for teacher training but also control the professional journals the teachers read and the organizations they join. The teachers colleges were created not only to train teachers but also develop curriculum policies for the public schools. And although each state has charge of its own teachers colleges and public schools, the professors of education are organized professionally along national lines and therefore can exert a national control over the teaching profession as a whole.

As state institutions, the public schools are well protected from the market forces that normally determine the success or failure of a private enterprise. While monopolies in the private sector are possible but highly unlikely, unless sanctioned by government, they are virtually inevitable in the public sector

because of the latter's hierarchal, bureaucratic structure which rewards conformity and discourages competition. Those who work their way up into positions of power and control in the hierarchy use that power by way of tenure to solidify and perpetuate their control. Since they set the standards for promotion within the hierarchy, they promote only those who support them. Thus, the system is self-perpetuating.

There was a time before the 1930s when the public schools performed a pretty fair job of teaching children the basic academic skills. Old timers like to refer back to those days as proof that the public schools were, and might once again become, sensible places where children could get decent educations. But those days are gone forever.

What happened to create that change? The most significant development in primary schooling was the growth of the Progressive Education Movement. Actually, the movement was started in 1919 by a group of private educators who wanted to liberate the school from its structured formalism and transform it into something more natural, child-centered, and creative. Their rejection of "intellectual tyranny" made them receptive to less formal ways of teaching reading. They were among the first to experiment in the classroom with whole-word techniques.

In 1930 the movement took a definite shift to the left when socialist educators took control of it. They saw the movement as a means of bringing a new pro-socialist activism to the schools of education which would create a new curriculum designed over the long run to produce radical social reform in American society. The new educational philosophy, largely inspired by socialist educator John Dewey, changed the focus of education from the development of individual academic skills to the development of cooperative social skills. Self-centered creativity was discarded in favor of collectivist cooperation. The group was elevated above the

individual in importance, and cooperation was to replace competition as the incentive for schoolroom achievement. Dewey's famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago (1896-1904) and, later, the Lincoln School (1917-1946) at Teachers College, Columbia University, where Dewey opened shop in 1905, set the new experimental direction for teacher education. The old tried-and-true methods of teaching the basic academic skills were rejected because they produced individual, independent minds for a competitive society. If the competitive society was evil, then the training system that sustained it had to be abolished.

Curiously enough one of the patrons of the Lincoln School was John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who sent four of his five sons to be educated there. Jules Abel, in his book, The Rockefeller Billions, revealed some interesting details about what the Lincoln School did for the boys:

> The influence of the Lincoln School, which, as a progressive school, encouraged students to explore their own interests and taught them to live in society has been a dominant one in their lives. It is notable that John D. Rockefeller 3rd, who did not attend, is a retiring person in contrast to the more or less extroverted other sons. . . . Laurance states that the Lincoln School experience whetted his appetite in gadgetry. . . .
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> Yet Laurance gives startling confirmation as to "Why Johnnie Can't Read." He says that the Lincoln School did not teach him to read and write as he wishes he now could. Nelson, today, admits that reading for him is a "slow and tortuous process" that he does not enjoy doing but compels himself to do it. This is significant evidence in the debate that has raged about modern educational techniques.

So even the super-rich could fall victim to educational malpractice under the guise of progressivism and not know what was happening. The tragedy is that there are millions of Americans like Nelson and Laurance Rockefeller who must endure for their entire lives the crippling consequences of such malpractice.

It is, of course, no accident that the two leading developers and pushers of the new teaching method spent their entire careers at the two main centers where most of the progressive ferment was taking place. William Scott Gray joined the faculty at the University of Chicago in 1914; was dean of its college of education from 1917 to 1931, and served as executive secretary of the Committee on the Preparation of Teachers from 1933 to 1945. In the years 1924, 1936 and 1948 he was chairman of a national committee that recommended changes in the organization of reading programs from kindergarten to college. He was chief editor of the Scott Foresman Dick and Jane basal reading program from 1930 until his death in 1960.

Arthur I. Gates toiled in the vineyards of Teachers College, Columbia, as a professor of education from 1917 to 1956, after which he supervised research at the university's Institute of Language Arts until 1965. He was chief editor of Macmillan's basal reading program from 1930 well into the '60s. He died in 1972. Both Gray and Gates wrote hundreds of articles on reading instruction for the professional journals as well as numerous textbooks used in teacher training. Gray was especially instrumental in organizing the International Reading Association in 1955, which has become the world's largest and most influential professional organization devoted to reading instruction. It is perhaps the only organization of such size in which a form of educational malpractice has been enshrined as the highest pedagogical good, and its practitioners awarded prizes for their "achievements." Only under a state-controlled educational

system is such a travesty of intellectual values possible. And only under such monopolistic conditions can mediocrity and quackery triumph so completely.

Actually, the beginning of quackery in public education goes back to the very beginning of state-owned and operated teachers colleges in this country. The first such college opened in America in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1839. Horace Mann, who in 1837 had become the first secretary of the newly created Massachusetts Board of Education, considered the teachers college -- or "Normal School" as it was then called -- to be the key institution in the whole edifice of state-controlled education. The great movement for universal public education, which took place roughly from 1819 to 1855, was the first great liberal crusade to eradicate the ills of mankind by applying science and rationality to education. The liberals believed that the means to human moral progress lie in a state educational system whose teachers would be trained by the state to perform the utopian task of reforming the human race. One of the targets of the reformers was primary education. Mann was very critical of the traditional alphabetic method of teaching children to read and he heartily endorsed a new whole-word method invented by Thomas H. Gallaudet, director of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb.

Gallaudet, who had been teaching the deaf and dumb to read English by way of a whole-word method combined with pictures, thought that the method could benefit normal children as well and spare them the drudgery of having to learn the alphabet and letter sounds. He published a whole-word primer in 1835, and in 1836 the Boston Primary School Committee decided to try the primer on an experimental basis. In June 1837 Horace Mann became Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and in November the Primary School Committee reported favorably on the Gallaudet primer. It was then officially adopted for use in the Boston

primary schools. Mann greatly favored the new method as a means of liberating children from academic tyranny, and he endorsed it in his Second Annual Report issued in 1838. This endorsement encouraged other textbook writers to get on the whole-word bandwagon, and they began producing their own versions of the Gallaudet primer.

In 1839, Mann and his fellow reformers established the first state Normal School in Lexington. Gallaudet had been offered the school's directorship, but declined it. The man who did accept the post, Cyrus W. Peirce, was just as enthusiastic about the whole-word method as Mann. And so, in the very first year of the very first state teachers college established in America, the whole-word method of reading instruction was taught to its students as the preferred and superior method of instruction. Thus, educational quackery not only got a great running start with state-controlled teacher training, but became a permanent part of it.

During the next five years, Mann's Common School Journal became the propaganda medium of not only the public school movement and the state normal schools but of its quackery -- particularly the whole-word method. But finally, in 1844, there was an incredible reaction. A group of Boston schoolmasters, who had had enough of the nonsense, published a blistering book-length attack on Mann and his reforms. Included in the attack was a thorough, detailed and incisive critique of the whole-word method, the first such critique ever to be written. This attack ignited a bitter dispute between Mann and the schoolmasters that was to last for more than a year and result in a return to common sense in primary reading instruction. The state normal schools, fledgling institutions at best, were simply not powerful enough to exert a decisive influence in the

local classroom. Professors of education were still a long way off in the future. So the alphabetic method was restored to its proper place in primary instruction. But the whole-word method was kept alive in the normal schools as a legitimate alternative until it could be refurbished by a new generation of reformers for use in the new progressive age.

Modern professors of education often defend the whole-word method by referring to Horace Mann's endorsement of it. But they never point out that Mann was a lawyer, not an educator, and that he never taught primary school. Nor do they point out that Gallaudet, the originator of the method, was a teacher of the deaf and dumb, or that the Boston schoolmasters found the method quite inferior to the alphabetic method. But then, in order to become a dedicated member of the educational hierarchy you have to ignore all legitimate criticism of the system. To acknowledge the validity of such criticism might simply undermine one's faith in one's chosen career.

What was the reaction of the professors of education to the publication in 1955 of Why Johnny Can't Read? They denounced Flesch in no uncertain terms, accusing him of misrepresentation, oversimplification, and superficiality. Gates wrote an article in the National Education Association Journal entitled, "Why Mr. Flesch Is Wrong," which Macmillan reprinted for wider distribution among parents and teachers. Other authors of whole-word classroom materials quoted Horace Mann in their defense. A writer in Nation's Schools complained: "How does one tell a gullible public that it is being exploited by a biased writer -- as in the case with Rudolf Flesch and his book Why Johnny Can't Read? It will take time and patience for parents to learn that Mr. Flesch has mixed a few half-truths with prejudices to capitalize on two misconceptions. The first is his superficial

notion as to what reading really is. The second is his misrepresentation as to how reading is taught."

Gray, to whom the profession looked for leadership, did an article for The Reading Teacher of December 1955 entitled "Phonic Versus Other Methods of Teaching Reading," while in that same issue F. Duane Lamkin of the University of Virginia wrote a piece entitled "An Analysis of Propaganda Techniques Used in Why Johnny Can't Read." Actually, to Gray the Flesch attack was nothing new. In 1951 there had been so much lay criticism of whole-word reading instruction that The Reading Teacher of May 15, 1952 published an article entitled "How Can We Meet the Attacks?" In the January 1952 issue of Progressive Education, Gray specifically addressed himself to that problem. And in September of that year he did another piece for the Elementary School Journal on that same problem. Teachers were reassured by Gray's research evidence which was described by a writer in The Reading Teacher as "a veritable storehouse of ammunition."

In the year of Flesch, another important event took place. Gray and his colleagues decided to combine the National Association for Remedial Teaching and the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction to form one major professional organization: the International Reading Association. It would, in a few short years, become the impregnable citadel of the whole-word method. Gray, as expected, was elected its first president. According to The Reading Teacher of October 1958:

"Dr. Gray worked hard to set this young organization on its feet. He organized the first annual conference of IRA and was both the program chairman and convention manager. The outstanding success of that first conference helped gain for IRA immediate respect in the eyes of the education profession."

In 1956 the IRA had 7,000 members. Today it has about 65,000 members, with over 1,000 affiliates and councils in the U.S. and 38 in foreign countries. It publishes four journals and holds an annual convention that attracts as many as 13,000 registrants. In addition, many of its state organizations hold annual local conventions of their own. So if you've wondered why reading instruction in America has not gotten better since the publication of Why Johnny Can't Read, there's the answer. The profession is simply two well insulated from public or parental pressures. As long as the schools continue to buy the books the professors write, why change anything?

Meanwhile, in those twenty-five years, criticism of the whole-word method has continued unabated. Charles Walcutt's Tomorrow's Illiterates appeared in 1961, and Arthur Trace's Reading Without Dick and Jane was published in 1965. The Council for Basic Education was founded in 1958 by a group of concerned academicians who advocated a return to phonics, and in 1961, Watson Washburn, a New York lawyer, founded the Reading Reform Foundation, a lay volunteer organization dedicated to the restoration of intensive phonics as the primary means of teaching children to read. But compared to the IRA, the combined opposition is like a swarm of flies on the back of an elephant.

Despite the furor among parents raised by Flesch's book, no major publisher brought out a phonics-based reading instruction program until 1963 when Lippincott, Open Court and the Economy Company all published new phonics programs. But the

big companies -- Scott Foresman, Macmillan, Ginn, Harper & Row, Houghton Mifflin, American Book Company, etc. -- continued to publish and sell their whole-word programs to about 85 percent of the primary school market.

Then, in 1967, a book was published that caused the IRA a bit of a problem. The book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, was written by Dr. Jeanne Chall, a respected member of the IRA and a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After several years of research into a mountain of studies done on beginning reading instruction, Chall came to the conclusion that the phonics -- or code -- approach produced better readers than the whole-word approach. In short, it was a vindication of what Rudolf Flesch had asserted twelve years earlier. But since the book, financed by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, had been written for the educational rather than the popular market, it did not make the kind of waves in the general press that Flesch's book did.

And because Chall had given ammunition to the IRA's worst enemies, the profession dealt with her in their own way. The reviewer in the IRA's Journal of Reading (January 1969) wrote:

> What prevents Chall's study from achieving respectability is that many of her conclusions are derived from a consideration of studies that were ill-conceived, incomplete and lacking in the essentials of suitable methodological criteria. In her eagerness to clarify these studies she allowed her personal bias toward a code emphasis to color her interpretations of the data. . . .
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> It seems rather odd that a researcher intent upon dispelling confusion should have allowed herself to be moored on a reef of inconclusiveness and insubstantiality.

Reviewers in The Reading Teacher, Elementary English, and Grade Teacher were just as critical. All of which seriously reduced the impact that Chall's could have findings had on teachers of reading.

Meanwhile, whole-word authors found it necessary to come up with new arguments to counter the potential competition from the new phonics-based textbooks entering the market in the mid-sixties. The argument they used most effectively was that "research" had shown that there was no one best way to teach reading to all children. Since "research" can be used to prove anything, the new argument could be debated forever to create an unending state of academic confusion in reading pedagogy. Adding to the confusion was an expansion of the pedagogic vocabulary, the use of new terms borrowed from linguistics and elsewhere, sometimes to convey new concepts, at other times to obfuscate the obvious. What emerged in IRA circles was an "eclectic" consensus that offered phonics advocates a few bones to quiet them down. But the debate continued to rage.

However, a new level of sophistication in whole-word pedagogy was reached in 1967 when Prof. Kenneth S. Goodman, the Scott Foresman editor who has inherited William S. Gray's mantle of leadership, published his controversial article, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," in the May 1967 Journal of the Reading Specialist. It was, for all practical purposes, an attempt by a professor-of-education whole-word author to discredit the new phonics competition from Lippincott. Goodman wrote:

> The teacher's manual of the Lippincott Basic Reading incorporates a letter by letter varians in the justification of its reading approach: "In short, following this program the child learns from the beginning to see words exactly as the most skillful readers see them . . . as whole images of complete words with all their letters."

In place of this misconception, I offer this: "Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined as reading progresses."

More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game.

So a whole-word author was willing to admit that to him reading is a guessing game -- albeit a "psycholinguistic" one. But what does psycholinguistic mean? Psycho means mind and linguistic means language. In other words, reading is a mind-language guessing game. But is it? Couldn't reading also be defined as translating written sound symbols into the exact spoken language the symbols represent? The alphabet, in fact, was invented to make guessing in reading unnecessary. Once you were trained in the sound-symbol system, precision in reading became automatic. You might not understand all the words you read, but that would be the case with all readers throughout their lives. Vocabulary building is a lifelong process facilitated by reading. But to be taught reading deliberately as a guessing game could cripple a child's intellectual development for life.

Despite Goodman's marvelous new definition of reading -- a definition inspired by the inadequacies of the whole-word method -- what the professors of education could not brush aside was the increasing evidence from a wide variety of sources that the reading and writing skills of American school children were declining alarmingly. The decline was evident not only among the slowest students but also the best. /Karl Shapiro, the eminent poet-professor who had taught creative writing for twenty years, told the California Library Association in 1970: "What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities. Their illiteracy is staggering. . . . We are experiencing a literary

breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters."

Other reports, less eloquent than Shapiro's, told the same story in the numbing statistics of the journalist, government bureaucrat, or educational researcher. It all added up to a literacy crisis of enormous proportions. When things get that bad, Americans, by habit now, turn to the federal government for salvation. Salvation came in the form of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and its now famous Title One compensatory education program. The new Title One bureaucracy began showering the schools of America with billions of dollars in the hope that students who were failing in reading would be saved from future lives as functional illiterates. But as so often happens, the money was used to fatten the establishment rather than raise the level of literacy.

In January 1967, The Reading Teacher did a survey of how Title One money was being spent by the 17,000 school districts involved in the program. Directors, associate directors, assistant directors, coordinators, teachers, aides, secretaries and advisors were being hired by the thousands and much new equipment bought. A school district in Montana reported buying "tape recorders, records, opaque projectors, two Craig readers, strip film projectors and plenty of outside reading material such as the Webster Classroom Reading Clinics and series of supplemental readers." A district in South Carolina bought "appropriate basal readers, graded supplemental readers, linguistic materials, skills workbooks, programmed materials, multi-level reading laboratories and kits, pictionaries and dictionaries, special skill building games and aids, various charts, and language development kits."

What a bonanza for the suppliers! But did it do any good for the kids? If it did, then we should have seen an improvement in reading scores by 1977. Ten years ought to be enough time in which to test the effectiveness of a federal program. But the results were quite dismal. The Boston Globe of July 10, 1977 reported:

"Reading scores for Boston's school children show the system this year failed to make significant improvement in the basic skills of most poor children and black children. . . . The underlying problem may well lie with inadequacy of teacher training, [Supt.] Fahey said. Despite the millions of dollars invested in teachers, aides, reading laboratories, textbooks, materials and workshops, the results in Boston, as well as other urban centers, are not showing important gains."

The situation in New York City was perhaps worse. The New York Times of December 31, 1979, in a story headlined "Tests Show Dip in Reading Ability Among Students," wrote glumly:

"In a dip from 1978 levels, 60 percent of the students in New York City's public elementary and junior high schools read at or below the national average, according to last spring's annual citywide reading tests. . . . The continuing decline in ability to read is 'cause for alarm,' said Alan S. Blumner, acting director of the Board of Education's Office of Educational Evaluation."

As for SAT scores, they were in an alarming nosedive. The Boston Globe of August 29, 1976 described it as "a prolonged and broad-scale decline unequalled in US history. The downward spiral which affects many other subject areas as well, began abruptly in the mid-1960s and shows no signs of bottoming out." The verbal SAT mean

score had gone from 467 in 1966-67 to 429 in 1976-77 to 424 in 1980.

Anyone intimately acquainted with the reading-instruction scene could have predicted as much, for the federal billions did absolutely nothing to correct the teaching-methods problem. In fact, it aggravated the problem by literally forcing the schools to finance even more educational malpractice than they could have ever afforded on their own.

The failure of Title One to improve reading skills did not go entirely unnoticed. In 1969 the National Academy of Education appointed a blue-ribbon Committee on Reading to study the nation's illiteracy problem and recommend ways to solve it. On the committee were such academic luminaries as James S. Coleman (Univ. of Chicago), Jeanne S. Chall (Harvard), Kenneth B. Clark (CUNY), John B. Carroll (U. of N.C.), John H. Fischer (Columbia), and others. The committee, which published its report in 1975, had this to say about Title One:

"It is not cynical to suggest that the chief beneficiaries of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) have been members of school systems -- both professional and paraprofessional -- for whom new jobs were created. Seven years and as many billion dollars later, the children of the poor have not been 'compensated' as clearly as the employees of the school systems through this investment."

The committee recommended a rather radical idea -- a sort of Reading Stamps Program -- the use of vouchers with which students could purchase reading instruction from competent public and nonpublic sources. "We believe," wrote the committee, "that an effective national reading effort should bypass the existing education macrostructure. At a

minimum, it should provide alternatives to that structure. That is, the planning, implementing, and discretionary powers of budgeting should not rest with those most likely to have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, especially given their unpromising 'track record.'"

What the committee was telling us, in effect, is that the greatest obstacle to literacy in America is our own educational establishment, and that if we want to achieve real education in our country, we shall have to circumvent that establishment. It was more easily said then done. But at least the committee had said it, and that's an important milestone.

But the committee's solution was no solution at all. It advocated yet another federal bureaucracy to compete with the already existing one, as if there were such a thing as a good, efficient bureaucracy without a vested interest anywhere. Furthermore, it raised the sticky question of where the committee would find the constituent support for such a solution. "Reading," they wrote, "still just might be the kind of issue that suggests bold new steps without really upsetting any applecarts. As we have suggested above, however, a reading program divorced from realignment of power, influence, and income has dismal prospects for success." Which meant that any real solution would have to be found outside the public sector.

Actually, in 1975, there was already in operation a federal program that was making a very discreet effort to circumvent the establishment. It had been launched in 1970 by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen, Jr., as the Right-to-Read program. The purpose of the

program was to mobilize a national commitment to literacy somewhat in the same spirit that the nation had mobilized its talents and technology to put a man on the moon, but with much less money. That such a program was even needed when Title One was already supplementing the schools with billions of dollars in reading programs merely dramatized the frustration that "good" bureaucrats sometimes experience in dealing with "bad" bureaucrats.

Of course the International Reading Association was first in line to welcome the new program, which meant more bucks in the pockets of publishers and reading specialists. Donald L. Cleland, president of the IRA, stated in the November 1971 issue of The Reading Teacher:

"The International Reading Association, the most prestigious single organization in its field, through its Commission on Quality Teacher Education and other appropriate scholars stands ready to lend its expertise to the United States Office of Education in the launching of improved teacher-education programs, both preservice and inservice."

But you can't fool all of the people all of the time. Indeed, some bureaucrats are honest men trapped in a system they cannot change. I found such a one in Joseph Tremont, director of Right-to-Read in Massachusetts from 1973 to 1980. Tremont had entered the teaching profession in the late fifties with much youthful idealism. He had taught in grade school, at teachers colleges, and had worked with Dr. Chall at Harvard on her great research project. But at the end of 1980 he quit the teaching profession for private industry. In May 1980, a month before Right-to-Read folded, he told me:

"I'm sorry I didn't realize the impossibility of all of this

fifteen years ago. I don't know how anyone can stay in this business and keep his self-respect. The irony is that I did everything I wanted to do. I did unbelievable things. But my superiors couldn't care less. They only care about the money from Washington. This is the most heartless bureaucracy I've ever seen in my life. Most of them are educational hacks I wouldn't even spit at."

In 1981 Rudolf Flesch published Why Johnny Still Can't Read, a new up-to-date exposé of the literacy scandal. But this time the reading establishment barely took notice. Kenneth S. Goodman, leading apostle for "psycholinguistics," the new look-say, had become president of the IRA in 1981, carrying on the tradition started by William Scott Gray. And if the nation wasn't all that worked up over what Flesch had to say, it was probably because it had already begun to accept declining literacy as part of the way things are. Besides, it was now possible to blame television and the breakdown of the family for the decline. Indeed, the reading problem had defied solution for so long that it now seemed wiser to adjust to illiteracy than to beat one's head against a stone wall.

For example, in 1980 the Texas state textbook committee adopted five whole-word basal reading systems to be used throughout the state's public schools for the next five years, thus insuring the perpetuation of the reading problem. This was done after Flesch had published in the November 1979 Family Circle magazine his list of the "dismal dozen" look-say programs which he advised parents to beware of if they didn't want their children to become reading disabled. All five selected by Texas were on that list. The Reading Reform Foundation sent hundreds

of letters to Texan parents urging them to write their State Commissioner of Education. The result was that a phonics-oriented textbook was added to the five already adopted. None of the dismals was thrown out. It would be up to the local schools to choose whichever of the six programs they wanted. You can imagine which ones would eventually find their way into most of the classrooms.

If Flesch had proven anything, it was that the educational establishment was virtually immoveable -- not only incapable of self-correction but of even admitting that there was anything to correct. For parents it meant that they could not depend on the schools to teach their children to read properly, especially if the child were given "compensatory" instruction through Title One. For example, in Boston, the program for 1981 was described in part as follows:

"The Title I teacher assisted by an instructional aide works with eight children to provide an individualized program of instruction. . . . The child is programmed into a basal series with many other supplementary materials available including the use of audio-visual equipment and material. . . . First grade children will use the same materials that they use in their regular reading program." Four of the five basal series used in the program were look-say in approach; one was phonics-oriented. The [redacted] results, therefore, were quite predictable.

So what is the solution? The best way to improve literacy in America is to get the government out of the education business, break up the monopoly created by the professors of education, and let the

fresh air of the free market ventilate this most suffocating area of American cultural life.

But since the best solution is not attainable at this time, there is an inferior one that might possibly work. Since the Congress is determined to pour billions down the educational rathole, might it not be a good idea to steer some of that money toward the students instead of the teachers? Instead of rewarding teachers who can't teach, why not award cash prizes to students who achieve literacy by any means. It wouldn't take long for parents and students to ferret out those teachers and tutors who can teach and desert those who can't. The simple truth is: if you reward failure, you get failure; if you reward achievement, you get achievement.

Naturally, the teaching establishment would object to any plan that diverted federal funds away from them. So the likelihood of such an idea being adopted is somewhat remote.

What prevents America from seeking a real solution to the reading problem is its slavish adherance to the idea of state-monopoly education with all of its greed and celebration of mediocrity, its oppression of the free spirit, and its strident anti-intellectualism. You cannot achieve high individual literacy in a system that numbs the intellect, stifles intelligence, and reduces learning to the level of Mickey Mouse.

So what is to be done? Since there is no national solution to the literacy problem acceptable to the educators or legislators, parents shall have to deal with the problem themselves. Many parents, in fact, have withdrawn their children from the public schools and put them in private ones. Some parents have joined the growing movement

for home education so that they can teach their children themselves. In other words, there are ways to escape the monopolists, but it takes strong conviction and a bit of knowhow to do so. Meanwhile, the vast majority of American children are trapped within a system that is turning their brains into macaroni. It's a tragedy that this has to occur when there is no lack of knowledge on how to teach a child to read well. After all, they did it for at least three thousand years before the professors of education took over.