

# Reading the Naked Truth

*Literacy, Legislation, and Lies*

Gerald Coles

**Heinemann**

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

*Offices and agents throughout the world*

© 2003 by Gerald Coles

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Coles, Gerald.

Reading the naked truth : literacy, legislation, and lies / Gerald Coles.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-325-00337-8 (alk. paper)

1. National Reading Panel (U.S.) Report. 2. Reading—Phonetic method—United States. 3. Reading—Language experience approach—United States. 4. Reading—Research—United States. 5. Reading—Law and legislation—United States. I. Title.

LB1573.3 .C65 2003

372.46'5—dc21

2002014591

Editor: Lois Bridges  
Production: Vicki Kasabian  
Cover design: Night and Day Design  
Typesetter: Argosy  
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
07 06 05 04 03 VP 1 2 3 4 5

*To Rom, Terry, Jeremy, and Walter ...*

**“Beat on the drum and blow the fife”**

Heinrich Heine

# ontents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
<b>1</b> The Road to Mandating Instruction and Ending “Wiggle Room”	<i>1</i>
<b>2</b> “Diversity” of Views	<i>23</i>
<b>3</b> Training and Other Kinds of “Boosts”	<i>40</i>
<b>4</b> Less Than Impressive Effect Sizes	<i>56</i>
<b>5</b> Systematic Phonics Beats Whole Language!	<i>73</i>
<b>6</b> “These [Phonics] Facts Should Persuade Educators and the Public”	<i>86</i>
<b>7</b> Encouraging Students to Read More	<i>99</i>
<b>8</b> Unhandcuffing Reading Education	<i>115</i>
<i>Endnotes</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Appendix</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>178</i>

# Acknowledgments

In their steadfast commitment to sound teaching and learning, and in opposition to the assault on education, countless teachers throughout the United States and in other countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, Israel—to name but a few) have opposed the legislation mandating authoritarian and harmful prepackaged reading instruction. These teachers have been learning about the so-called scientific research used to justify restrictive mandates, such as those contained in the educational legislation of George W. Bush. They read books and articles on sound teaching. They share information with colleagues. They support one another. They organize conferences that include alternative viewpoints. They speak out individually and in groups against these mandates. But most of all, they continue to insist upon using sound teaching in their classrooms. Sometimes this means going against the grain, feigning to teach the anemic, scripted lessons but actually providing their students rich literacy learning behind the closed classroom door. And sometimes it means yielding to the mandated instruction; adding as much sound teaching as possible within compulsory constraints; enduring until the failures of the mandated pedagogy become evident; hoping and working to make sound teaching prevail.

My thanks to these teachers not only for what they have done for children but for what they have given me. During the last few years I have spent more time than I could have ever imagined reading and writing about the empirical research related to the mandates. Through this often tedious, sometimes exasperating work, I have been in contact with these teachers in conferences, Internet discussions, and so on, and their determination and commitment have helped sustain me. Always I have felt, to paraphrase Robert Frost, “we work together, I tell them from the heart, whether we work together or apart.”

Also determined and committed is my editor, Lois Bridges (the editor who never sleeps). Along with offering her keen editorial eye,

she has encouraged and supported books that have helped counter the attack on literacy education and promote good teaching. Lois truly is a tree standing by the water that shall not be moved.

Much appreciation to Maura Sullivan, Vicki Kasabian, and Leigh Peake for their many contributions to this second Heinemann book.

For his fellowship in being the only other person in the universe who has actually read end to end the pseudoscience I discuss in this and my previous book, and for his many kinds of help, a special thanks to Steve Krashen.

Thanks also are extended to Elaine Garan, not only for her help but for so often standing up as a majority of one.

Joanne Yatvin has shown principled courage as the sole dissenting voice on the National Reading Panel and as a whistle-blower revealing the Panel's deficient processes in contriving its report. She deserves profuse appreciation, and she certainly has mine.

And always, for Maria Tova, love and poet, whose work, understanding, and compassion are embodied in the twenty-two letters referred to in the Sefer Yezirah (The Book of Creation, the first Kabbalah text), letters filled first and foremost with *meanings*: “Twenty-two letters: Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future.”



# Unhandcuffing Reading Education

## **The Texas “Miracle”**

An adequate understanding of the National Reading Panel Report and the Bush reading legislation requires placing them within the context of Bush’s educational and social policies both in Texas and the White House. According to NRP member Sally Shaywitz and her husband and coresearcher, Bennett A. Shaywitz, Bush’s initial policy steps were thorough and scholarly: he and Reid Lyon “looked first to the science, to the empirical data and based on that evidence, developed proposals for more effective approaches to teaching reading.”<sup>1</sup> Surely the two of them huddled studiously over the data would have been a sight to behold. Lacking that, we are left only with the practical results accrued in subsequent steps, chief of which is the “Texas educational miracle” Bush was supposed to have spearheaded as governor from 1994 to 2000. A brief examination of this “miracle” is worthwhile because it provides an informed picture of extensive educational outcomes that skills-emphasis reading instruction has produced and is likely to produce for the nation.

A “Bush for President” news release boasted that “reading performance in Texas has improved since Bush became governor: 88 percent of the third-grade students passed the reading portion of the

state assessment test in 1999—up from 76 percent in 1994.” Minority students too were described as having “made strong gains” on the state’s own Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). For example, “African-American students in both the eighth and fourth grade increased their passing rate on the reading exam by 23 points between 1994 and 1999.”<sup>2</sup>

Discussing “Reading: The Key to Success,” Laura Bush praised her husband’s educational successes. “When Governor Bush took office,” she said, “one in five Texas school children was failing the reading portion of the state’s skills test. To change this disturbing statistic,” he and the education commissioner “laid out a plan to equip every child in Texas with essential skills for learning” and thereby “ensure that every child in Texas learns to read by the third grade and continues reading at grade level or better throughout his or her public school years.” According to Mrs. Bush, “The plan is working. Texas public schools are improving. Test scores continue to climb, and minority student achievement is the best we’ve seen in decades.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly praised were the reported educational achievements under Rod Paige, the superintendent of the Houston schools before he became secretary of education in the Bush administration. The *New York Times*, for example, reported that under Paige, Houston schools had “improved reading scores.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably, this was one reason that, shortly before becoming secretary of education, Paige received the Harold W. McGraw Jr. (of McGraw-Hill publishers) \$25,000 Prize in Education.<sup>5</sup>

*“You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass the literary test,”  
Bush explained.*

What was the formula for the dramatic improvements in performance on the Texas tests? In the second month of his presidency, George W. Bush provided a succinct answer: “You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass the literary test.”<sup>6</sup>

## Texas Myth

The chief problem with Bush’s syllogism is not its misuse of grammar and words—*her* for *she* and *literary* for *literacy*—but its logic. Yes, if children genuinely learn to read, they will most likely be able

to pass a literacy test; however, the converse is not necessarily true: if students pass a literacy test (e.g., the TAAS), that does not necessarily reveal their reading abilities. Similarly, the cumulative pass rates on the TAAS do not necessarily demonstrate a Texas miracle.

*The “Texas miracle” was actually the “Texas myth.” Reading scores have been no better than the national average.*

The work of educational researcher Walt Haney, comparing the TAAS scores with those of Texas students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), contains evidence of this syllogistic non sequitur and for Haney’s conclusion that the “Texas miracle” was actually the “Texas myth.” He found that the seemingly huge overall achievement gains demonstrated on the TAAS were not duplicated on the latter, nonpartisan measure. For example, the performance of Texas fourth and eighth graders during the Bush years was “very similar to the performance of fourth- and eighth-graders nationally,” just as it had been before he took office. Haney found “not a single instance in which average NAEP scores in Texas vary from national means by as much as two-tenths of a standard deviation.”<sup>7</sup> For example, fourth-grade reading for Texas in 1998 was a mean of 217, exactly the same as the national average on the reading test at fourth grade. The 1998 eighth-grade reading score mean was 262 for students in Texas, compared with 264 for students nationally. For minority students, contrary to claims about the racial achievement gap narrowing in Texas, outcomes were worse. Between 1992 and 1998, the NAEP reading scores for fourth graders showed an increase in the gap between white and minority students.<sup>8</sup>

*Between 1992 and 1998 the reading score gap has increased between white and minority fourth-grade students in Texas.*

Why have students done better on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills than on national tests? Interviews with teachers, Haney reported, suggest that teaching to the test was a large part of the answer: Classes have emphasized teaching TAAS-related content while deemphasizing content not related to the test. As added insurance, “in most schools TAAS practice quizzes were administered on a regular basis with emphasis on teaching to the TAAS format, such as having students practice ‘bubbling’ in answers on machine scorable answer sheets.”<sup>9</sup>

Rice University educational researcher Linda McNeil has concluded that many students pass the TAAS reading tests “by being able to select among answers given; they are not able to read assignments, to make meaning of literature, to complete reading assignments outside of class.”<sup>10</sup> McNeil also laments that “instead of reading novels, kids are skimming three-paragraph passages for key words.”<sup>11</sup>

McNeil and University of Texas at Austin Professor Angela Valenzuela found that “the TAAS emphasis on reading short passages, then selecting among answers given to questions based on those short passages, has made it very difficult for students to read a sustained reading assignment.” With respect to the “fourth-grade slump,” middle school teachers report that after several years of work with TAAS practice materials, middle school students often are “unable to read a novel even two years below grade level.”<sup>12</sup>

Supporting Haney’s conclusions about student achievement in Texas is a RAND study by Stephen Klein and colleagues, which also compared the scores on the TAAS with those on the NAEP for fourth and eighth graders.<sup>13</sup> Summing up their findings on the “Texas miracle,” Klein said, “It’s not a miracle. We think these [TAAS] scores are misleading and biased because they’re inflated. They’re improvements in scores, but not in proficiency.”<sup>14</sup>

*Of the fifteen cities with the highest dropout rates during Bush’s years as governor, six were in Texas.*

Neither did Haney find evidence that beginning reading and unceasing testing produced any long-term educational miracle. Texas, throughout Bush’s governorship, had been among the top states in high school dropout rates, especially for black students, whose graduation rate under Bush was about 60 to 65 percent, well below the national average of 82 percent.<sup>15</sup> A study by Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University supported Haney’s dropout conclusions. They found that of the fifteen cities with the highest dropout rates, six were in Texas (San Antonio, Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston, Austin, and El Paso) during Bush’s years as governor. Former Superintendent Rod Paige’s school system, Houston, had the seventh-highest dropout rate among the nation’s urban school districts, with fewer than 50 percent of freshmen graduating four years later.<sup>16</sup>

## Texas Education Facts

The Bush “signature issue” is, in fact, a simplistic—and wholly inadequate—bootstrap solution to the education of children, especially poor children. Instead of focusing on a well-trained, professionally competent teaching force and on providing it with all that is required to ensure a rich education for children, he supports scientific reading education that offers seemingly “teacher-proof” packaged programs. The Bush approach provides education-on-the-cheap while enhancing the profits of publishers like McGraw-Hill, the major producer of the packaged programs.

One example of Bush’s indifference to building a professional, experienced teaching force is Texas teachers’ salaries, which under his governorship ranked thirty-sixth among the states. One study found that 28 percent of Texas teachers had to take second jobs.<sup>17</sup> Although Bush frequently mentions giving the teachers a \$3,000 pay raise in 1999, the largest in fifteen years, he leaves out the fact that he fought for a \$1,500 raise but lost to the Democrats, who had first proposed a \$6,000 pay raise.<sup>18</sup>

Bush attempted to take credit for some educational reforms that preceded his tenure as governor. For instance, reduced class size reform that included a mandatory maximum of twenty-two students per class from kindergarten through fourth grade was established by Democratic Governor Mark White in 1984. Yet even while associating himself with this reform, after becoming governor, Bush “called for effectively eliminating the limit on class size,” saying it was “an infringement of local control.”<sup>19</sup> Under Bush, the number of schools requesting and receiving class-size waivers (allowing them to increase class size) increased.<sup>20</sup>

Campaigning as a strong supporter of education when he first ran for governor, Bush pledged to increase the state’s share of public school funding from 45 percent to 60 percent. Yet when Bush left office, the Texas Legislative Budget Board reported, the state’s share of public school funding had fallen to 44 percent, the lowest percentage since the state began educational reform in 1984.<sup>21</sup>

*Bush showed no meaningful concern for the various aspects of children’s lives that influence learning success or failure.*

Bush’s signature issue also masks his overall colossal indifference to children. While proclaiming a dedication to ensuring that children

obtain basic reading skills—a far cry from ensuring a full education—he showed no meaningful concern for children’s living conditions and overall quality of their lives, elements with incalculable effects on learning success or failure. For example, Texas ranked second among states in the percentage of people—especially children—who went hungry and third in the percentage of malnourished citizens. After Bush vetoed a bill to coordinate hunger programs in Texas, reporters asked him about hunger in the state. “Where?” was his reply.<sup>22</sup>

Under Bush, Texas was tied for the third highest percentage of children in poverty. Just three states provided lower welfare help. Under Bush, Texas slashed its food stamp payments, an essential program for the poorest of children, by \$1 billion. Also under Bush, Texas ranked second in the percentage of poor children who lacked health insurance.<sup>23</sup> In 1999, when Texas was flush with a budget surplus, Bush initially fought to block some 250,000 children from receiving affordable health care. While fighting this insurance program, he declared a legislative emergency to push through a \$45 million tax break for oil well owners, saying, “People are hurting out there.” He also had the opportunity to invest more of the surplus in education but instead pursued tax cuts.<sup>24</sup>

## President Bush

As Bush carried his Texas game plan into the White House, accolades for his educational budget and dedication to education were ceaseless, with few commentators bothering to investigate beyond the facade.

What exactly was Bush’s budgetary great leap forward, for example? Had he gotten his way, his increase in the education budget of approximately \$2.5 billion for fiscal year 2002 would have been about 5.9 percent. In contrast, the fiscal year 2001 education

*“We really thought if [Bush] were serious about education, [he] would give us somewhere close to the resources that are needed.”*

budget, the last Clinton budget, was \$42.1 billion, an increase of 18 percent over the previous year’s funding. The final budget that Bush signed, following revisions in the House and Senate, was \$48.9 billion, an increase of approximately 16.2 percent—not an insignifi-

cant increase, but again, less than the last Clinton increase of 18 percent.<sup>25</sup> (The 48.9 billion is also about the same size as the increase Bush requested for the military budget shortly after signing the educational legislation.<sup>26</sup>)

Although the budget put \$900 million into promoting scientifically based reading education, other areas of education were cut and more cuts were planned. Support for libraries decreased, even in light of the documented substantial inequalities between classroom libraries in rich and poor school systems and despite strong documentation for the relationship between access to print and reading achievement. The cuts, an American Library Association executive calculated, could “buy nearly 1.1 million hardcover books,” and, the executive added, “We really thought if they were serious about education, they would give us somewhere close to the resources that are needed.”<sup>27</sup> The budget he submitted eliminated all funds for the National Writing Project, a program that promotes “professional development activities and programs that foster improvements in teaching and learning of writing” across the nation. Only because of an extensive campaign by the Project and its supporters were the funds restored and increased in the Bush budget. Nevertheless, shortly after signing the No Child Left Behind legislation in January 2002, Bush recommended eliminating funding for the National Writing Project and other “low-priority” education programs in the fiscal year 2003 budget!<sup>28</sup>

During the Budget Committee’s deliberations, the Democrats offered several amendments that would have provided additional funds critical for improving education, such as class-size reduction and school renovation and construction. The Republicans defeated all these amendments. Following his signing of the education legislation in January 2002, Bush also proposed cutting all funds for rural education, school counseling, and educational technology.<sup>29</sup> Barely enlarged were funds for Head Start, a 1.9 percent proposed increase that allowed the program simply to maintain its enrollment level of less than 50 percent of all children eligible for the program.<sup>30</sup>

Little attention was given to school conditions or to ensuring a professionally solid teaching force. For example, in Los Angeles, overcrowding has forced children to attend school on a staggered year-round schedule; half of all new teachers, and a quarter of all teachers, lack formal teaching credentials. Instead, Bush proposed freezing funds for teacher quality programs.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, as organizations like the Children's Defense Fund document, approximately 12 million children—one in six—live in poverty. Although there was a recent drop in the poverty rate in 2001, children were more likely to be poor than they were twenty or thirty years before. The child poverty rate was highest for African Americans (30 percent) and Latinos (28 percent), but by international standards, it was also exceptionally high for white children (10 percent). For children under six, the “near poverty” rate was 40 percent!<sup>32</sup>

Twelve million children were in households unable to afford adequate and nutritious food. About 3.6 million children lived in “severely substandard housing.” Eleven million children had no health insurance and were “less likely to receive medical and dental care when they needed it” or have adequate follow-up care “to manage chronic illnesses like asthma or diabetes.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course these conditions were not created by the Bush administration; nevertheless, it is within this context that Bush's compassion and concern for children must be judged. Even if his scientific reading education were actually to have a scientific basis, focusing on reading education alone, without concern for these catastrophic realities, would have to be seen in a questionable light. Instead, we can only conclude that the Bush reading education legislation, containing deficient solutions and false promises, is part and parcel of the rest of his policy of indifference to all but the wealthy.

*For Bush, reading comprehension appears to mean recognizing the right and wrong answers.*

## **Bush and Reading**

Reading instruction that minimizes actual reading and conceives of comprehension as recognizing the right and wrong answers to test questions appears to be consonant with the meaning of reading in Bush's personal development and current functioning as president. Despite claiming that reading education is his signature issue, and the <[www.whitehousekids.gov](http://www.whitehousekids.gov)> website listing reading as his top favorite pastime, George W. Bush's apparent aversion to reading is sufficiently well-known to inspire endless jokes, such as Paul Begala's, “Let's be honest. If you want to hide something from George

W. Bush, put it in a book,”<sup>34</sup> and Arianna Huffington’s “uncurious George,” a play on the title of the popular children’s book series he consistently reads to young students.<sup>35</sup>

Whenever asked about his reading, his replies never inspire awe. “I can’t remember any specific books,” he told a child who asked him to name the book he liked most when he was young.<sup>36</sup> Asked the same question another time, he replied that it was *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, even though the book was published in 1969, the year after Bush graduated from Yale.<sup>37</sup> When asked to name something at which he isn’t good, he said, “Sitting down and reading a 500-page book on public policy or philosophy or something.” He has also used joking, self-deprecating tactics to deflect criticism of his reading, such as “[Bill Buckley and I] go way back, and we have a lot in common. Bill wrote a book at Yale—I read one.”<sup>38</sup>

Mark Crispin Miller, author of *The Bush Dyslexicon*, has provided a keen insight into Bush’s views on reading comprehension, the purpose of reading books, and, indirectly, his emphasis on skills and testing. In a Republican candidates debate, when Bush was asked what lessons he had learned from a biography of Dean Acheson he said he had been reading, Bush gave a rambling answer that cobbled together snippets of speeches and contained not a single remark about the book itself. Responding to another question a few minutes later, Senator John McCain brought a portion of the Dean Acheson biography into his answer and even quoted an exchange Acheson had had with Harry Truman. Piqued by the speculation that he might not have read the book, Bush said about McCain’s performance, “Maybe I should have picked out one little bitty detail of the book. I don’t think so. I thought my answer was the right answer, otherwise I wouldn’t have given it.”<sup>39</sup>

Miller observes that Bush’s “defensive self-appraisal” says it all, capturing what’s wrong with his “way of reading” and “education plans.” There could be no “right answer” to the open-ended question. Rather, the question offered Bush the opportunity to use this book about past foreign policy to think aloud about the foreign policy he envisioned. “But all that Bush could do was quickly rummage through his little bag of ‘themes’ for ‘the right answer.’” He later told the *Washington Post* he had “absolutely hammered” the question, as if all that mattered was the right answer to an examination question. What mattered was not the ideas in the book, what they meant to him, and how they applied to the political issues that faced him and

the nation, but only that he got a good score. Thus, if he had actually read the biography, Miller concludes, “he read it just as he has always read (or had his staffers read) the memos and reports that cross his desk: in search of simple, handy bits for later use. This is not the way to lead or read—or to teach children how to read.”<sup>40</sup>

*Reading for Bush is a utilitarian process of gathering together pieces of information for later performance.*

Could this add to the explanation of why Bush extols skills as he does, and of what appears to be the perfect fit between the skills-emphasis pedagogy and the reading education mandated in his legislation? Reading, for Bush, is not about extensive, deep comprehension, not about comprehension leading to possible transformation. Reading for him is a utilitarian process of gathering together pieces of information for later performance, rather than one that is connected to thinking, personal development, and application to a reader’s life and world.

An encounter between Bush and children in a classroom provides a final insight into Bush’s conception of reading instruction. According to journalist Arianna Huffington, since first running for governor, Bush has “made hundreds and hundreds of school appearances over the years and it’s always the same drill: Anytime he gets within shouting distance of school kids, no matter their age—whoosh!—out comes *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.” Therefore, at an Albuquerque school, although the book is geared toward preschoolers, Bush read it to the second graders. “You could almost see the kids rolling their eyes in unison,” Huffington says, “but Bush wasn’t going to deviate from his historically narrow comfort zone, even though he admitted” afterward that the book was not age-appropriate: “These kids are way beyond *The Hungry Caterpillar*,” he said.

Pondering why Bush “only feels comfortable reading the same children’s book again and again,” Huffington proposes, “It’s what this confirms about him. After all, the essence of reading is encountering new ideas and different viewpoints, and here is a man who has no interest in either of these things.” Reading for Bush is performance. It is not about engaging children’s interest. It is not about generating a discussion. And it is not about associating children’s experiences and previous ideas to their current comprehension of a book. Books seem to have as little place in learning to read as they do in Bush’s life. Nonetheless, “I like to read. I read a lot,” he told the Albuquerque stu-

dents. When asked what he thought of a six hundred-plus-page biography of John Adams he was supposedly reading as part of his “typical” day, he answered, “I like it. It’s interesting.” About which Huffington remarked, “Well there you have it. Literary analysis worthy of the *Paris Review*.”<sup>41</sup>

## What “Science Tells Us”

As I was finishing this book, proclamations about the new scientifically based reading instruction were making headlines week after week. First Lady Laura Bush, for example, speaking before the House Education and Workforce Committee, insisted that there was no excuse for elementary school teachers not knowing how to teach children to read. “We now know—because science tells us—what teaching methods are most effective.” Unlike the skills-emphasis scientists, however, the first lady accurately observed that it was traditional teaching, not any kind of new instruction, that this science claimed to validate. The fundamental message of this science was: let’s get back to basics. Why? Because “the basics work,” said Mrs. Bush. “Reading programs that include phonics and phonemic awareness work. Regular testing works. Some methods are tried and true, and we must make sure our teachers learn them.”<sup>42</sup>

*The phrase “science tells us” makes doctrine based on biased beliefs appear to be objective, independent findings based on impartial pursuits.*

The phrase “science tells us” is frequently heard among skills-emphasis proponents. Testifying before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce in 1999, Reid Lyon described what the “research has taught us.”<sup>43</sup> The same committee heard Representative Anne Northup of Kentucky praise Bush’s reading legislation because it was based on what “science tells us” about reading instruction.<sup>44</sup> And commenting on the contributions of the NRP Report “and Reid Lyon’s energy and efforts,” NRP member Sally Shaywitz and her husband, Bennett Shaywitz, enthused, “there is hope of closing the gap between what science tells us and what happens in the classroom.”<sup>45</sup> The use of the phrase “what science tells us” is extraordinary insofar as it reconceptualizes what is no more than a doctrine based on biased beliefs into what is continually described as objective, independent findings based on impartial pursuits. Pure science conveys

its truths to us: we tell it nothing; it “tells us.” The phrase might not be a bad one if we were told the actual findings in this science.

In summing up, I want to reemphasize that this is not a debate about whether or not phonemic awareness, phonics, and other word skills contribute to learning to read. Everyone debating beginning reading education agrees that they do and that these skills should be taught. The question at issue is, How and to what extent should skills be taught, especially in relation to other strategies?

The debate is also not about whether direct, systematic, and explicit instruction should be part of teaching. Here, too, everyone agrees that it should be. The question is, How much and when should it be part of reading instruction?

Finally, the debate is not about whether scientific knowledge and empirical studies can contribute to formulating instruction. Rather, the questions are, What do the empirical studies actually show? What does scientific knowledge contribute? and, Is it sufficient for formulating instruction?

The studies used in the Report actually do help us clarify these issues. This science—in contrast to the Report’s interpretation of this science—tells us that the claims that “PA training benefits . . . reading comprehension” and that “PA training improved children’s ability to read . . . in the long term,” as determined by tests of reading comprehension that “yielded statistically significant effect sizes” is simply not supported by the evidence in the studies reviewed in the Report. Neither is there evidence in these studies that PA training contributes a long-term reading benefit to children who are “at risk for developing reading problems in the future.”<sup>46</sup>

Neither is there evidence that teaching PA skills in a direct, systematic training program is superior to teaching these skills as needed. The science shows us that if the skills are taught this way, beginning readers will learn them. However, the very science used in the Report also shows that the skills can also be taught as needed and within larger written language activities. That is, a teacher can identify specific skills that children need, teach those skills, and not bother to teach skills that children demonstrate they have already acquired. This would seem more efficient

*The Report’s studies do not justify mandating one approach over others.*

and the only concern would be whether a teacher is able to identify and teach all the specific skills needed in a full classroom of children.

This legitimate concern is allayed by the outcomes of the Report's studies that found that, according to reading outcome measures, teachers who taught this way were effective.

Neither did the studies used in the Report support the conclusion that "systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic" phonics instruction.<sup>47</sup> Hence, a reasonable conclusion, based on the Report's studies, should be a pro-choice one that allows teachers to choose the method of skills instruction they want to use. The Report's studies do not justify mandating one approach over others.

The studies comparing literature-based/whole language instruction with more direct forms of teaching also lead at least to a pro-choice conclusion. That is, strictly in terms of the outcome measures, both approaches are equally effective, and the science clearly does not support the conclusion that "phonics produced better reading growth" than "whole language approaches."<sup>48</sup> Looking solely at the NRP Report research, we can conclude, first, that a beginning reading approach that encourages the use of multiple strategies for identifying words and obtaining meaning is at least as effective, and can be even more effective, than one that encourages reliance primarily on phonemic and phonics skills strategies.

Again, any legislation and policy using the actual scientific findings of the Report's studies would, at a minimum, have to encourage a pro-choice position. Moreover, even within a pro-choice option, educators and the public would have to be cautioned that the scientific evidence for the long-term benefits of skills-emphasis, stepwise, direct instruction in beginning reading, especially at the cost of minimizing meaning and comprehension, is virtually nonexistent. What the science actually shows us is the necessity of basing reading instruction policy on more than the evidence from empirical studies.

The studies I have reviewed in the previous chapters constitute the fundamental evidence cited on behalf of the skills-emphasis, stepwise, small-to-large-parts reading instruction model recommended in the NRP Report and mandated in the Bush reading legislation and in other policy documents at state and local levels. I have not covered two sections on beginning reading instruction that are in the Report—one on guided oral reading and another on reading comprehension—because such a discussion would add nothing that would help us appraise it. The debate is not about whether comprehension should

be part of beginning reading instruction. Rather, the issue is whether the model in the Report and legislation is correct: do children first

*Any legislation and policy using the actual scientific findings of the Report would, at a minimum, have to encourage a pro-choice position.*

have to go through a stepwise progression of basic skills before comprehension becomes a substantial part of instruction? The Report's section on reading comprehension offers a number of suggestions for teaching it but assumes that comprehension must stay in its place within the stepwise model, gaining serious

attention only after the acquisition of a sequence of skills. The Report's research evidence offers no evidence to support this assumption.

## **Choice? No!**

The fact that the Report's studies support, at the minimum, a pro-choice position is anathema to the skills-emphasis proponents. NICHD-supported researcher Louisa Moats expressed this position when she alleged that teachers do not want choice. Teachers tell her and other "experts," she claims, "Please don't give us any more choices. Tell us what to do. Give us validated programs that work."<sup>49</sup> Although Moats has repeated this assertion of what teachers tell us, she has yet to offer evidence to substantiate it.

Moats' paper "Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of 'Balanced' Instruction," published by the right-wing Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and linked in the NICHD reading research division website, contends, as the title implies, that whole language lives but should die. Moats worries that in states where "sound policy" has been established at a statewide level, "whole language may appear to be dying" but because classroom practice has not caught up with policy, "it's not dead at all." Especially harmful is its erroneous conception of "balance," which is not built on the fact that "most children must be taught to read through a structured and protracted process in which they are made aware of sounds and the symbols that represent them, and then learn to apply these skills automatically and attend to meaning." These are Moats' claims, despite the actual findings in the Report's science that neither the

superiority of “structured and protracted process” nor the inferiority of whole language teaching has been validated.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, if one were to select an approach solely on the basis of the Report’s own studies, a better choice would be a literature-based/whole language approach because it promotes comprehension right from the start of reading instruction, while not diminishing children’s effective use of important strategies and skills. The evidence also suggests that the whole language approach encourages a more positive attitude and enthusiasm toward reading, which in turn might prevent aliteracy, and it is more likely to incorporate extensive writing that promotes learning reading skills, written expression, and vocabulary use.

### **What Is Omitted? Educational Success Beyond Third Grade**

The focus on reading up through the third grade, both in the Report and in the Bush legislation, omits by definition any consideration for the grades beyond third. The focus assumes that once children have attained the basics—or, to use a vocational concept, have gained entry-level knowledge—they will then have the means to ascend higher and higher on the educational ladder. Guiding this assumption is the skills-first adage that children must first learn to read, after which they can read to learn, with the fourth grade usually considered the dividing line between these two steps. This is another theory, not a fact, and is especially suspect because a focus on “ensuring that all children learn to read by third grade” fails to take into account the question of whether, through third grade, children should do work linked to later educational requirements, such as writing, comprehending subject matter ideas and information, reading literature, and reading for sizable periods of time. Within the framework of the two-phase learn to read/read to learn model, the NRP Report and the Bush legislation focus solely on their rendition of the first phase.

*The Report’s focus on beginning reading is a glaring disregard of the fourth-grade slump.*

The omission of any consideration for anything but beginning reading is a glaring disregard of what has been written about the

fourth-grade slump, a point at which children lose interest in reading and cannot cope with new instructional materials and requirements. As Jeanne Chall has observed: “At about grade 4, when the curriculum requires higher cognitive and linguistic performance,” many children’s reading begins “to slip. They slumped first on word meanings, particularly on abstract, literary, less common words.” Although Chall was a leading proponent of skills-emphasis, first-learn-to-read instruction, her recognition of the need for children to read both widely and in depth, starting in beginning reading, contradicted the educational steps she usually advocated. In her study of “why poor children fall behind” in reading, for example, Chall speculated that they did so at fourth grade because they “probably owned and read fewer books; and they may have been read to less than middle-class children.” Yet, the Report and the Bush legislation have nothing to say about the issue of how poor children, in their beginning reading years, are going to duplicate the extensive reading of middle-class children and thereby reduce the chances of falling victim to the fourth-grade slump.<sup>51</sup>

## Omission of Writing

The entire focus of the Report and the Bush legislation is on reading, not literacy, and within that focus, writing is minimized, despite the considerable evidence that writing, especially children’s early writing, contributes to learning word skills, expression of ideas, learning to revise work, and numerous reading activities. The twenty-five-year perspective of writing researcher Donald Graves is instructive in this regard:

In 1978, as part of my Ford Foundation study, I reviewed UNESCO funding patterns for literacy programs in various countries. Virtually all the literacy programs were geared to helping people learn to read. None of them stressed the importance of children’s ability to write. I find it curious that the great debate in America still centers on how to teach our children to read, not on their learning to write.<sup>52</sup>

Graves’ research has provided extensive understanding of why both writing and reading must be part of literacy education from the beginning: “Children who write continually apply phonics, con-

struct syntax, and experience the full range of skills in authoring a text. Writers are more assertive readers and less likely to accept the ideas and texts of others without question since they have been in the reading construction business themselves.”<sup>53</sup>

*For the Report and the Bush legislation, writing is rarely considered.*

His research has contributed to detailed study of children’s writing development in kindergarten and first grade. For example, he describes the variety of children’s initial writing efforts, such as “using the resources of the letters in their own name” and linking initial letters with a drawing. He advises teachers on the variety of writing they will first encounter in children’s initial efforts, such as some children using just one letter, others writing words using the initial and final consonants only, and some having some sight words. He also offers numerous recommendations for reading/writing activities, such as how to help children share their writing in ways that will make them better readers, and how to help those who also read and listen to this writing become better comprehenders.<sup>54</sup>

But for the Report and the Bush legislation, writing is rarely considered. At best, it fleetingly appears as a minor undertaking next to the primary task of reading.

## **Missing: Ongoing Assessment**

Exploration of the question of how teachers can have ongoing knowledge of children’s achievements and needs is another essential component of teaching that is absent from the Report. This teacher competence is not simply secondary to the content of reading instruction (phonics, comprehension, etc.); it is fundamental for determining what that content should be. It is fundamental for avoiding a one-size-fits-all pedagogy and for ensuring that a teacher attends to individual differences. This is more than another void in the Report; it reveals the barrenness of the proposed structured and protracted scripted instructional approach.

*The Report does not explore how teachers can have ongoing knowledge of children’s needs in order to address individual differences.*

An illustration of the ongoing assessment that the Report should have considered is literacy educator Gretchen Owocki’s discussion of

the “many tools” that provide teachers with knowledge of both what is “necessary in understanding what to teach and how to teach it.” One such tool is writing samples (e.g., student-written stories, journals, notes) that reveal “children’s knowledge of written language functions, phonics knowledge, spelling development, sense of story, and personal connections to literature.” Another is “structured observations of children’s” book reading to “track and understand children’s early reading development.” A third is “oral reading samples” to “understand children’s decoding and meaning-making strategies.” A fourth is observations of “text retelling,” which occurs after silent or oral reading and in which a student draws, writes, acts out, or orally expresses a retelling. Observations of retellings kept over time “show children’s progress in learning to make meaning from text.”<sup>55</sup>

Regie Routman’s work provides numerous research-supported guidelines for observing and evaluating readers. She details procedures for informal reading conferences, note taking as children read, continuous evaluations of student reading that reveal “students’ strengths and weaknesses and future teaching directions.” She describes evaluations of students who need “to learn and apply phonics” and students who need “to self-monitor for meaning.” Evaluations include identifying appropriate books for children to read and learning from students’ self-monitoring of their reading. She also explains how to use portfolios of children’s work as part of ongoing evaluations.<sup>56</sup>

How can anyone not be critical of a national policy document on “teaching children to read” that does not prominently offer direction to teachers for doing ongoing appraisals of students’ literacy progress and for linking instruction to these appraisals? Perhaps this omission was to be expected from a panel that did not include a single beginning reading teacher.

## **What’s Hot?**

The omissions in the NRP Report and the mandates enforcing its brand of instruction have contributed to a damaging skewing of reading research and practice. A good indicator of how widespread the damage is can be found in the International Reading Association’s poll that asks literacy leaders to identify “hot” and “not hot” topics in reading research and practice for the coming year, as

well as those topics that are no longer hot. “Hot” means that the topic is “currently receiving more and positive attention.” “Not hot” means that the topic is receiving “less attention or negative attention.”

While the majority of respondents (at least 75 percent) listed “balanced reading instruction” as “hot” and “should be hot,” it was less so than in the previous year. The decline in attention to “balanced reading instruction” becomes clear when we look at the categories of comprehension, literature-based instruction, word meaning/vocabulary, multicultural literature, portfolio assessment, and whole language, all of which the majority identified as “not hot.” Moreover, whole language was deemed not only “not hot” but in deep freeze, with more than 50 percent of the respondents judging it “cold” and a “significant number” of them believing it was cold beyond resuscitation and should, in fact, be removed from the list of topics. Instead, the IRA surveyors decided to keep it because, despite its having become a corpse, “there are still a number of allusions to the term in the popular media.” In contrast, the majority of respondents thought phonemic awareness, phonics, and decodable text were “hot” topics.<sup>57</sup> In other words, what is omitted or minimized both in the skills-emphasis model and in the Report appears to have also become omitted or minimized throughout reading education.

*To receive funds through the Bush legislation, applicants will have to employ skills-emphasis instruction.*

## **The Shape of the Future?**

Despite the lack of scientific evidence supporting it, the NRP model embedded in the Bush legislation is shaping and promises to keep shaping reading education exactly as outlined in the “What’s Hot” survey. To receive funds available through the legislation, applicants will have to employ instruction that accords with the legislation’s strictures. Evidence for this expectation is in the grant applications for funds through the Reading Excellence Act, the small-sized precursor to the Bush legislation, passed at the end of the Clinton administration, and also requiring scientifically based instruction. I have examined many of these applications and here will describe one from Hawaii that is representative of the instruction that was and will be demanded in order to obtain funds.<sup>58</sup>

The “primary sources” of the “knowledge base” for the “scientifically based reading research” underpinning the Hawaiian grant application include the NRP Report and publications by skills-emphasis educators such as Louisa Moats, Marilyn Adams, Linnea Ehri, Edward Kame’enui, Barbara Foorman, Keith Stanovich, and, of course, Reid Lyon. The research is described as “the rich and robust consensual evidentiary knowledge base,” with the term *consensual* meaning, as the application explains, that there is a “broad consensus within the field”—an “auspicious alignment of forces”—agreeing that this kind of education has scientific support. The grant application contains no supportive evidence for these generalities, but presumably the writers of the grant felt these lofty descriptions would be sufficient for those who would read the grant and decide whether to approve it.

The application vividly illustrates what “balanced instruction” really means in the “scientific” model and practice. Instruction in phonological awareness, “the first dimension of beginning reading instruction,” is “obligatory, not optional.” The second step is “instruction in the alphabetic principle,” that is, linking letters and sounds, commonly known as phonics. Comprehension waits patiently while the students work on “fluency with the code,” that is, reading smoothly, or, as the proposal describes it, “decoding fluency,” because students must first become fluent readers for whom the “decoding processes are automatic, requiring no conscious attention.” Fluency precedes comprehension because, the application explains, “if a reader has to spend too much time and energy figuring out what words *are*, she will be unable to concentrate on what the words *mean*.” The application does not say that this description is a theory, not a fact, and it certainly does not say that the theory is not supported by the NRP Report’s own studies.

If there were any doubt about the emphasis of the beginning reading curriculum that is proposed, one need only look at the description of the teacher training program, which describes the three areas in which teachers will receive “intensive instruction”: helping children develop phonemic awareness, “understand the alphabetic principle,” and “relate sounds and symbols automatically.” And if doubt still remains, one need only look at the instrument to be used to assess this reading education, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). As the name suggests, it focuses on skills: phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and oral reading fluency—areas described as being aligned

with the “big ideas in early reading.” Nowhere in the DIBELS evaluation through the third grade is there an assessment of comprehension or writing!<sup>59</sup> The other instrument used is the Reading and Curriculum Based Measures, an instrument measuring one-minute oral reading fluency of passages.

Ironically, a study by Hawaiian educator Anna Sumida reveals that this kind of curriculum is exactly *not* what Hawaiian students need most. Sumida found that in a typical classroom profile for second and third graders in a school with primarily poor children, most children (e.g., twenty out of a class of twenty-one) are able to decode at or above grade level; it is their comprehension that lags behind! The data show, Sumida concludes, that “teachers were already doing a fine job teaching phonics skills. It was comprehension that teachers needed to work on, but the programs used in the intervention supported by the REA grant will not address this need!”<sup>60</sup>

*It is time to demand policy based on an accurate appraisal of what the science actually teaches us.*

## Rolling Up Our Sleeves

In several years, if “scientific” reading instruction is allowed to dominate classrooms, and after the educational charade that it is becomes clear, we can be certain that the blame will fall not on national policy or on the scientific reading programs, but on teachers, for not correctly implementing them, and perhaps on the children themselves and their families.

Speaking at a middle school while campaigning for president, Bush asserted, “We want our teachers to be trained so they can meet the obligations, their obligations as teachers. We want them to know how to teach the science of reading. In order to make sure there’s not this kind of federal—federal cufflink.”<sup>61</sup> By now, everyone is familiar with Bush’s verbal foibles and can probably guess what word he had meant to use. Regardless, it unquestionably is time for the parents, educators, politicians, and public who recognize how damaging this “science of reading” is and will be to undo the “cufflink,” roll up our sleeves, and demand an end to unjustified mandates and a beginning of a new policy based on an accurate appraisal of what the science actually teaches us.