

## Where higher standards could make a difference: Beginning Reading

By Dr. Don Crawford



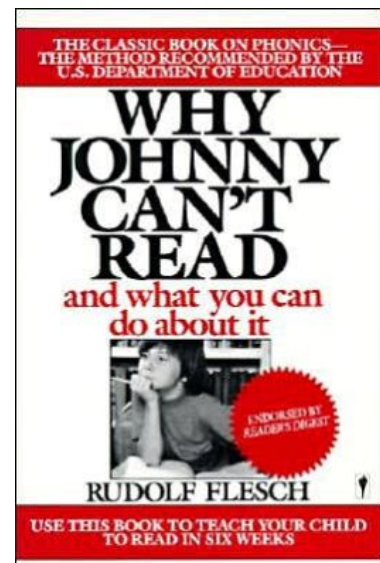
They tell us the intent of the Common Core is to raise standards and achievement in our K-12 schools. But teachers can't raise standards in classrooms full of students who are so far behind they can't do grade level work. To raise standards you have to begin at the beginning.

The biggest impediment to higher standards in our schools is the poor reading ability of so many children. About 42 percent of 4th graders score below basic in overall reading skill on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We are not talking about reading Shakespeare here. We are talking about basic decoding—the ability to say the words that are on the page. These are students did not learn to read in first and second grade and they never caught up. So few students do catch up that many studies have shown that reading level in first grade, is an astonishingly

good predictor of reading achievement into high school. When the first grade classroom fails to teach a child to read, short of outside intervention by the parents, that child is very unlikely to ever be able to do rigorous academic work or meet high standards. We know that most of those unable to easily read their textbooks will drop out of high school.

So why don't these non-readers ever catch up? It's not what you think. They didn't miss some magic window of learning to read. Children of any age can learn to read accurately and fluently. As children mature, it doesn't become harder, it actually becomes easier to teach beginning reading. Even illiterate adults can learn to read, given the right kind of instruction. Children who don't learn to read in first and second grade very seldom catch up because our school system is so inflexible that it doesn't deliver enough of the right kind of instruction to teach beginning reading to children beyond the second grade. This is true even though everyone knows that teaching children to read should be the top priority of schools. There are two parts to the failure: the kind of instruction and the amount.

The right kind of instruction in reading has been the subject of controversy in American public education since Rudolf Flesch published "Why Johnny Can't Read," in the 1950s decrying the lack of phonics instruction in beginning reading. Shockingly, the same argument has been going on for over sixty years! In the 90s the government tried to clear things up with the Reading First initiative. The University of Oregon was a national leader in this



effort to institute reading instruction based on the overwhelming scientific evidence that explicit and systematic phonics with a focus on reading aloud accurately is needed if you want all students to learn to read. The overwhelming majority of children who didn't learn to read in first and second grade did not get this kind of reading instruction. The older students usually don't get enough of this kind of reading instruction, if they get remedial help at all. They need about an hour and half every day of intensive, systematic phonics instruction in beginning reading. Most remedial programs in the schools, even if they are right kind of program, don't provide enough time on a daily basis to enable students to catch up.



Here's the most amazing thing. There are excellent tests, known as DIBELS, to see if students are learning to read, developed here in Oregon. These tests are quick, easy-to-use, inexpensive, and can tell early in first grade if a student is making adequate progress in learning to read. The standards are clear, simple, and measureable which enables schools to change instruction or provide supplemental help in time to prevent and avoid student failure to learn to read.

Clear, measureable, standards in first and second grade could force schools to adopt effective beginning reading instruction. We could end the scourge of illiteracy if we did that. We could have simply adopted the DIBELS standards for first and second grade without having to spend billions of dollars on the Common Core. If every child successfully learned to read in the primary grades it would then be possible to raise our standards and expectations in the later grades. Doesn't that make more sense, than trying to impose high academic standards on kids who can't even read? I know it is possible for all students to learn to read in the primary grades because I have run successful charter elementary schools which did it. It is challenging but possible. If we really want to improve the outcomes in our K-12 system we should forget the Common Core and begin at the beginning.

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