

# Put “Whole Language” on Trial

*The case against reading instruction that leads to illiteracy*

by MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

**ANXIETY ABOUT AMERICA’S APPROACH** to reading instruction is all around us once again, making its cyclical appearance like a plague of 17-year cicadas. Much of this is due to journalist Emily Hanford, whose radio documentaries on the science of reading and our schools’ unwillingness to embrace it have earned her awards and accolades while placing the issue of early literacy back near the top of the education-reform conversation.

This brings more than a little nostalgia for the late 1990s and early 2000s, the last time the country took a serious swipe at changing the way kids learn to read. The National Reading Panel declared in 1999 that students needed to be taught to read explicitly, including purposeful attention to phonics and phonemic awareness; by 2002, Congress was funding a new billion-dollar-a-year investment called Reading First, intended to get such an approach into the classroom. The program proved to be hugely popular with teachers. But it was polarizing among education-publishing oligarchs and, of course, infuriating to the “whole language” crowd, who prefer an approach that focuses on textual meaning and downplays the importance of learning to sound out words. A faux scandal soon put the initiative on ice, and almost immediately, many popular publishers starting dressing the now-suspect whole-language wolf in “balanced literacy” clothing.

It’s no surprise, then, that Hanford could easily find young teachers who had never encountered the science of systemic reading instruction during their pre-service preparation programs, as well as tenured professors who continue to spout the whole-language nonsense that children can learn to read naturally, just as they learn to speak.

## An “adequacy” path

So now what? Nobody seems to be in the mood to propose another big federal effort to fund professional development for teachers, especially one with the guts to separate the science-based wheat from the whole-language chaff. Besides, it would (in concept, anyway) be far more efficient to fix the problem at the root—to find a way to make schools of education teach science instead of schlock.

Plenty of good folks are trying, among them the National

Council on Teacher Quality, which has been pumping out reviews of state policies that would promote good reading instruction (especially by demanding that elementary-school and special-education teacher candidates pass tests on the science of reading), as well as reviewing teaching-training programs themselves. There are isolated examples of improvement—Mississippi, for example, requires aspiring teachers to take two phonics-focused classes in

reading instruction, and it passed a law supporting phonics training for professors at schools of education throughout the state. The latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed Mississippi students making progress in reading, even as student performance declined nationwide. Mostly, though, the states and schools of education have remained impervious to change. And as a result, the malpractice continues.

Perhaps it’s time to dust off another favorite strategy from the early 2000s: the adequacy lawsuit. (Yes, I know I’m writing in *Education Next*, but stay with me here.) As is well-known, that round of lawsuits latched onto state constitutional language (such as passages requiring a state to provide an “adequate” or “thorough and efficient” education) to demand more funding for schools. And according to Michael Rebell, lead litigant in New York State’s successful adequacy lawsuit, one of advocates’ key arguments was that more money was necessary to recruit and retain qualified teachers, without whom an adequate education was impossible.

It’s not such a stretch, then, to argue that states have a constitutional responsibility to ensure that the teachers produced under their aegis and employed by their public schools are prepared to provide an adequate education. And what is less adequate than an education that doesn’t lead to basic literacy for children? (This is a separate question, I should note, from whether there is a so-called federal right to literacy.)

Rebell said he thinks such suits just might work, especially if courts were to find that “states are not enforcing their own laws, or are derelict in monitoring the quality of graduates from teacher-preparation programs.” Al Lindseth, an attorney who spent many years opposing lawyers like Rebell, reluctantly agrees. “You could make a case,” he told me, “that a state is not setting its standards for teachers high enough, or enforcing them, for students to get an adequate education.”



## Handicapping a court-ordered solution

For both Rebell and Lindseth, the idea brought to mind *Vergara v. California*, a lawsuit in which advocates asked California's courts to find the state's teacher-tenure laws to be unconstitutional because they interfered with students' right to a quality education. (See "Teacher-Tenure Decision Is NOT an Abuse of Judicial Power," Fall 2014.) That case was unsuccessful, though, because it was brought on equal-protection grounds and plaintiffs failed to show that tenure was hurting kids of color any more than their peers. An equal-opportunity challenge related to shoddy teacher preparation would likely face the same roadblock.

Further, there is little, if any, legal precedent for suing schools of education; even medical schools enjoy significant protections from charges of malpractice related to the physicians they train.

All of which is why it would be important to go after states, and in particular states that have already lost finance-adequacy cases. It would also help if the chosen target states do not require elementary-school teachers to pass an in-depth test of the science of reading before entering the classroom, and if the states host several big education schools that earn failing grades when it comes to preparing candidates to teach reading effectively.

## What is less adequate than an education that doesn't lead to basic literacy for children?

States that appear to meet those criteria include Kentucky, South Carolina, and Washington.

I'm well aware that even succeeding with such a lawsuit in one or more states wouldn't solve the teacher-training problem nationwide. Furthermore, there's no guarantee that a court-ordered resolution would lead to better preparation programs (though it wouldn't be hard for a court to mandate that future teachers take a test of scientifically based reading instruction). It's even possible that an inexperienced but bookish judge could find the whole-language view of reading compelling and be hoodwinked by that crowd. Or perhaps this would open the door to ever more micromanagement from

the bench. (If a judge could mandate phonics, why not a particular approach to physical education?)


Still, putting the defenders of whole language and balanced literacy on trial would be its own form of justice—one that might even lead education schools nationwide to get religion on the science of reading.

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# Great Expectations

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The Impact of Rigorous Grading Practices on Student Achievement



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