



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 27, 2011

Education: Orphan Issue of the Campaign

Yet, every day, we read in the newspapers stories of what is going on in our schools, and none of it seems to arouse much interest among the candidates or our cultural elite. For example, [the Des Moines Register reported](#) earlier this month:



Nearly 1 in 3 Iowa fourth-graders last year lacked basic literacy skills and, if a proposal that Iowa lawmakers will consider next year had been in place, most may have had to stay in third grade.

The provision is part of a reform package Gov. Terry Branstad will introduce in January, and is based on a Florida initiative that has boosted scores.

Critics in Iowa say ending social promotion for third-graders could erode students' self-esteem, and they question the wisdom of retaining children based solely on their performance in one subject area.

But the policy's architects argue that literacy skills are so fundamental they trump everything else that occurs in the early grades.

"If they can't read by fourth grade, they're going to fall behind in other subjects, too," said Linda Fandel, special assistant on education in the governor's office.

Of course, there is a very simple way to solve the reading problem not only in Iowa, but in all of America. It's called "intensive, systematic phonics" and it is the only proper way to teach children to read a phonetic-alphabetic reading system. But our public educators insist on using a method that deliberately creates dyslexia. It is called "whole language," "the sight method," "look-say," "look and say." It has been used extensively in American schools since the 1940s and, as a result, American literacy has been declining ever since.

It was Dr. Rudolf Flesch who first brought this problem to the attention of the American people as far back as 1955, with his best-selling book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. He wrote: "The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all of the schools, in all of the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense."

He then explained how in the early 1930s the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out the traditional alphabetic-phonics method, which was the method used to teach this writer to read in a New York public school back in 1931, and put in a new sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese — an ideographic writing system. Flesch contended that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on an alphabetic writing system, you cause reading disability, also known as dyslexia.

So we've known the cause of our reading problem since 1955, and here we are in the final days of 2011 and we still have a reading problem. Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad wants to reform his schools by implementing a Florida program that has raised reading scores. The *Des Moines Register* reports:



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The literacy push is part of a wide range of school improvement tactics proposed by Branstad in October. Other proposals include more rigorous teacher evaluations, end-of-course exams in some high school subjects, and the creation of a grant fund to reward schools for innovation.

State officials won't release the retention policy's price tag until next month. But the Florida policy requires hundreds of millions of dollars annually for mandated student support services, documents show.

Why "hundreds of millions of dollars" would be needed to switch the teaching of reading from the "sight method" to intensive, systematic phonics is a mystery to me. Teaching phonics is not only the proper and best way to teach reading, but also the least expensive. For example, my Alpha-Phonics intensive phonics reading program, which has been around since the 1980s, retails for \$25, and if purchased in large quantity by a school district would cost much less. It doesn't take an Einstein to figure that one out.

Indeed, I wrote a letter to Gov. Branstad offering my expertise on the matter of reading instruction. I said,

I have just read a report in the *Des Moines Register* of 12/12/2011 on the sad state of literacy instruction in Iowa's public schools. The article states: "Nearly 1 in 3 Iowa fourth-graders last year lacked basic literacy skills and, if a proposal Iowa lawmakers will consider next year had been in place, most may have had to stay in third grade."

Fortunately, there is an immediate and simple solution to your problem. Simply have every student in Iowa's primary schools taught to read with Alpha-Phonics, and in a few months they will all become highly literate readers.

Alpha-Phonics, an intensive phonics reading program, was created thirty years ago by this concerned writer to help parents teach their children to read at home because the schools were not doing the job. The program has produced miracles. It is easy to use and very inexpensive. It would revolutionize how reading is taught in Iowa's schools.

Nothing would please me more than to come to Iowa and demonstrate how the program works. All of those students who must repeat third grade because of failure in reading can become excellent readers if given remedial instruction with Alpha-Phonics.

I will probably get a form letter expressing appreciation for my concern and thanking me for my suggestions. But, unfortunately, Gov. Branstad has no choice but to rely on his establishment educational experts to guide him, and the result will be the grotesque squandering of "hundreds of millions of dollars" to solve the problem, which in the end may or may not be solved.

Iowa is not the only state with an education problem. According to an article in the [Boston Globe](#) (11/29/2010), with the headline "Thousands called dropout risks," we read:

More than a third of eighth-graders attending urban school districts across Massachusetts at the end of the last academic year were at risk of dropping out of high school, according to newly compiled data from the state....

State officials hope the tracking system will be a powerful tool to keep more students in school. Each year, about 10,000 high school students across the state drop out.... One key barometer in the lower grades is whether students are skillful readers at the end of the third grade.

So the faulty teaching of reading is at the heart of the dropout problem. If a student can't read, and the



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school is incapable of teaching him to read, why should he prolong his agony as a dumbed-down non-reader by staying in school? Better to get out and get a job — inevitably a low-level job; but that is what the education system has prepared him for.

I know of only one member of the cultural elite who is aware of the problem and has expressed his concern. He is Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. In November 2007, the Endowment issued a report on the present state of literacy in the United States, "Reading at Risk." According to the report, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from nine percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. About half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure.

Gioia commented, "This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading."

The simple truth is that we have a tax-supported public education system that is deliberately destroying the brain power of millions of Americans so that we will not be able to compete with the Chinese, Indians, and South Koreans who are learning to read English better than Americans. And the billions being spent by the federal and state governments on education are simply perpetuating the problem, not solving it.

Recently, Dana Gioia and 40 other members of the cultural elite were asked by *Commentary* magazine (Nov. 2011): "[Are you Optimistic or Pessimistic About America's Future?](#)" Gioia wrote:

I remain optimistic in general terms about the United States.... I am far less confident, however, about the nation's cultural and intellectual future. There has been a vast dumbing down of our public culture that may already be irreversible.

There can be no doubt from the many detailed and reliable studies available that Americans now know less, read less, and even read less well than they did a quarter of a century ago. These trends have measurable consequences in lowering academic achievement and economic productivity.

The handwriting has been on the wall since 1955 and now it's hardly readable. But it should be rewritten as large and clearly as possible, so that the American people can understand that their blind support of government education is leading us into cultural barbarism.

The millions of young Americans who can't read will take out their frustration on the rest of us. And who can blame them? They are the victims of a Progressive government education system that refused to teach them to read in the proper manner. And the fact that most of our politicians do not have the knowledge and/or courage to make the necessary changes, means that we can expect more of the same for the foreseeable future. The establishment politicians want to "reform" education, which only means they want more money from the taxpayer to help the educational establishment feather its nests. It's an outrageous crime — without punishment.



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