



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 26, 2012

## Readingate: The 100-Year Coverup of Educational Malpractice, Part 3

In 1965, Congress decided to do something about the reading problem the only way it knows how: by throwing money at it. It passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with 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 what actually happened is that the 17,000 school districts that got the money indulged in an orgy of spending and hiring that caused untold joy among the suppliers and new levels of prosperity for the educators.



But did the program do any good for the children? Ten years later the results could be read in newspapers from New York to California reporting the disastrous decline in reading scores. As for SAT scores, they were in an alarming nosedive. The *Boston Globe* described it as “a prolonged and broad-scale decline unequalled in US history.” The verbal SAT mean score had gone from 467 in 1966-67 to 424 in 1980 — a drop of 43 points!

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 of solving it. In its report issued in 1975, which seems to have been read by no one, the committee 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 the school systems — both professional and paraprofessional — for whom new jobs were created. Seven years and as many billions of 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 or nonpublic sources. The committee further stated:

We believe 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.”

It was the first time in American educational history that a committee of educators had actually alluded



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to vested interests standing in the way of educational improvement. What the committee was telling us, in effect, was that the greatest obstacle to literacy in America was our own educational establishment and that if we wanted to achieve real education in our country, we would have to circumvent that establishment.

What a staggering indictment! The system had been created to ensure literacy for all. Now we were being told that it was an obstacle. But how could you circumvent \$100 billion worth of institutionalized malpractice?

Actually, the federal government had tried to do something like that in the 1970s with a program during the Nixon administration called Right to Read. Does anyone remember it? It was supposed to mobilize a nationwide effort to abolish illiteracy. It, too, failed because it could not overcome the establishment's monopoly over reading instruction. It quietly folded in 1980.

In 1981, Dr. Rudolf Flesch once more put the educators on trial with a new book, [Why Johnny Still Can't Read](#), an updated report on the reading fiasco. But this time the professors barely took notice of their long-time critic. They couldn't have cared less what he had to say. After all, they were virtually untouchable. Tenure alone secured their power.

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. Back in 1955, expectations for excellence were still high. But by 1981 — a generation later — the public was willing to settle for minimal competency. Besides, it was now possible to blame television, the nuclear arms race, 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 try to achieve what now seemed impossible: universal literacy.

Meanwhile, in 1980 the Texas state textbook selection committee adopted five whole-word basal reading programs to be used throughout the state's public schools for the next five years, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the reading problem for many years to come. This was after Flesch had published in the November 1979 *Family Circle* magazine his list of the "dismal dozen" whole-word programs which he advised parents to beware of if they didn't want their children to become reading disabled. All of the Texas adoptions were among Flesch's "dismal dozen."

And in California, in 1982, the Board of Education, not to be outdone by Texas, adopted nine basal reading programs, only one of which was phonics-oriented. Thus, the public education systems of the two largest states in America would engage in educational malpractice on an unheard of scale and produce functional illiterates by the millions. What is so horrendous is that both these states have large Hispanic populations who needed to be taught to read English in the most effective way possible — through intensive, systematic phonics — but were denied access to the method that would have made them fluent, proficient readers in English.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan's secretary of education, Terrel H. Bell, ordered another survey of America's failing education system. An 18-member National Commission on Excellence in Education was created. In April 1983 it issued its highly critical report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. Its most damning statement was widely quoted by the media:

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might



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well have viewed it as an act of war.

What were the results of the report? Some states made small improvements in graduation rates and SAT scores. But there were no spectacular improvements for one simple reason. The schools continued to dumb-down the students with their reading programs. In [Why Johnny Still Can't Read](#), Flesch had written: "Twenty-five years ago I studied American methods of teaching reading and warned against educational catastrophe. Now it has happened."

Of course, the response of the educators was quite expected: "If you want improvement in education, give us more money." And they got it.

If Flesch had proven anything, it was that the progressive educational establishment is virtually immovable — not only unwilling to change anything but even unwilling to admit that anything needs changing. For parents, this means that they cannot depend on the public schools to teach their children to read in the proper phonetic manner.

The only member of Congress who took an interest in the reading methods controversy was Senator Edward Zorinsky of Nebraska. In July 1983, he introduced a bill (S.J. Res. 138) to establish a National Commission on Teacher Education. He explained:

The colleges of education and departments of education are not subject to scrutiny as are our public schools. Therefore, a national Commission would be the most effective way to look into this matter. I also believe that we should not put this investigation into the hands of the education community alone. Representatives of business and industry as well as parents should be included in any study because they are also directly affected and can provide a fresh perspective.

Hearings were held before the Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources of the U.S. Senate on June 7, 1984. This writer was one of the witnesses who testified before the subcommittee. Other witnesses, including celebrated black educator Marva Collins, shared the same story of educational malpractice in the teaching of reading.

The hearings were published and a digitized version is available today through Google. But, as expected, nothing came of the testimonies. The education establishment had too many friends in Congress who could stop any attempt by parents or critics to change anything. Thus, Zorinsky's bill to form the commission failed.

Meanwhile, in 1988, Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, told a group of newspaper publishers: "Today up to 60 million Americans — one third of the adult population — cannot read their local newspaper. As we edge closer to the 21st century, life is becoming more complex and will become more difficult for adults who cannot read."

And according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, things haven't improved much since 1988:

In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) sponsored a comprehensive reading assessment of American adult literacy skills. Nineteen thousand adults were interviewed and given a reading assessment in all fifty states and the District of Columbia in both homes and in prisons.

After completion, this massive assessment revealed that only thirteen percent of American adults are proficiently literate, most of whom hold a college degree, while the majority merely have intermediate literacy skills. However, the population of adults with basic or below basic skills total forty-three percent according to NAAL research, which is far higher than those with proficient skills.



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In November 2007, the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts released its own alarming report on the state of literacy in the United States, *Reading at Risk*. It was unusual for a liberal cultural entity created by the federal government to shine a bright light on this ongoing educational problem. Thus, credit must be given to the Endowment chairman, Dana Gioia, for bringing the issue of illiteracy before the American people 52 years after [Why Johnny Can't Read](#). He said: "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."

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. Almost half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure. Why? Because reading has become a painful, tortuous exercise that they wish to avoid. The survey states:

*Reading at Risk* is not a report that the National Endowment for the Arts is happy to issue. This comprehensive survey of American literary reading presents a detailed but bleak assessment of the decline of reading's role in the nation's culture. For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading. Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern.

In other words, we are becoming an increasingly illiterate nation, which does not bode well for our future. And, as Flesch recommended in 1955, the solution is astonishingly simple: Start teaching every child in primary school to read with intensive systematic phonics. That's all it will take to restore high literacy to America, because once young Americans learn to read they will read whatever interests them, thus expanding their intellectual horizons. But for 2013, there is no sign that a return to intensive, systematic phonics is in the offing. What we will get is a new Common Core Standard for literacy, which does not guarantee that children will be taught to read in the proper phonetic way. A standard is no substitute for intensive, systematic phonics.

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