

WinkWorld February 2003

Local Control is Gone.

One of the historical ideas, which many in the public accept is that of local control of schools. It is assumed that the local communities know best what their kids need. For example, in my two worlds, Turlock (California) schools are different from the Faith (South Dakota) school, as the contexts are vastly different. It is safe to say that the people of Turlock do not know the kids of Faith, as well as the people of Faith do; and visa versa. The people of Faith need to determine of future of their school, and the people of Turlock need to determine the future of their schools.

However, as Dr. Jill Kerper Mora points out so clearly, that assumed right has been taken away by the implementation of No Child Left Behind.

When will the nation wake up to the fact that now bureaucrats in Washington have the power to approve or disapprove a local school district's choice of a reading curriculum? The federal government now controls the reading curriculum of the nation. If a curriculum doesn't meet the dogmatic criteria, the feds just yank their funding and send it to a school district that buys into its reading religion. Anything that even hints at an association with whole language, which now seems to be akin to "the Axis of Evil" is banished. And all this supposedly based on the National Reading Panel Report that said that there is no best way to teach reading!

Wake up America!

This battle between the federal government and local school districts is not at all about the best way to teach reading. It is about power and money. There is an article in the New York Times today (1.25.2003) by Abby Goodnough in which she quotes Diana Lam, New York City's deputy chancellor for teaching and learning. Lam explains that the district's choice of a reading curriculum will cost \$4 million as opposed to the more scripted mandated reading program that costs \$20 million. If NY is coerced into buying the more expensive program, it will lose \$16 million in revenues, and one publishing company will gain \$20 million. This is outrageous federal intrusion into local school control and decision making that smacks of a very sinister marriage of ideology and huge corporate interests.

Jill Kerper Mora, Ed.D.

Website: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/>

In closing, I can assure you that in my two worlds, the people of Faith and the people of Turlock know their kids and their needs far better than the people in Washington.

For more thoughts along this line, see:

<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020128&c=1&s=metcalf> or, the Abby Goodnough article is pasted below.

New York Times
January 24, 2003

Bush Adviser Casts Doubt on the Benefits of Phonics Program By ABBY GOODNOUGH

President Bush's top adviser on reading said yesterday that the citywide phonics program unveiled this week by Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein had no proven track record, suggesting that its adoption could cost the city millions of dollars in federal aid.

The adviser, G. Reid Lyon, a researcher at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, said there is no scientific evidence that the curriculum, called Month by Month Phonics, is effective with students who struggle academically.

"We can find no published research indicating that this program has been tested with well-defined groups of kids and shown to be effective," Dr. Lyon said. "And clearly one would want to know those kinds of details before incorporating any program into use."

Under the new federal education law, No Child Left Behind, school districts can receive federal funds for reading instruction only if their curriculum is scientifically proven to improve children's reading skills. Each state must submit a grant application detailing the programs and strategies it intends to use to improve reading scores; New York has not yet filed its application with the federal of Education.

New York State is scheduled to receive about \$70 million of the total \$900 million that the law provides for reading instruction this year. And much of the state's allotment would go to New York City, the nation's largest school system.

A federal rejection of the city's program would be a major embarrassment for Mr. Klein and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who are imposing uniform reading and math curriculums on all but the top-performing city schools as part of an overhaul of the school system.

Mr. Klein announced on Tuesday that Month by Month Phonics would be a cornerstone of the reading curriculum for students in kindergarten through third grade. In addition to phonics, students will practice reading and writing for 90 minutes a day using books from classroom libraries instead of basic readers.

But in assessing whether the overall curriculum qualifies for federal funds, the Bush administration will look especially hard at the phonics component. The No Child Left Behind law, which Dr. Lyon helped write, steers grant money toward programs that embrace explicit training in phonics.

Phonics instruction involves practicing the sounds that build words and matching them with letters. There is a longstanding and bitter debate over whether phonics instruction has more proven results than "whole language" teaching, which relies on stories to capture children's interest in reading and uses phonics secondarily. The program that Mr. Klein has in mind - Month by Month Phonics combined with using books - treads a cautious line between the two methods.

Dan Langan, a spokesman for the federal Education Department, said that Rod Paige, the education secretary, who is in charge of approving or rejecting states' reading grant applications, was enthusiastic about New York City's overall plans for improving student achievement.

"Secretary Paige has had very good conversations with both the mayor and the chancellor

generally about No Child Left Behind and what they are doing to try to implement the law," Mr. Langan said. "New York State has until July to submit its application for reading funds," he said.

Diana Lam, New York City's deputy chancellor for teaching and learning, said yesterday that she chose Month by Month Phonics because she did not want a rigid approach to teaching phonics, which is what many better-known, more expensive phonics programs offer. Month by Month Phonics will cost about \$4 million, she said, compared with about \$20 million for the more scripted Open Court reading program, used in Los Angeles.

Ms. Lam and other department officials said that test scores had risen in District 15 in Brooklyn and District 10 in the Bronx, which used Month by Month Phonics.

"There's no reason for us to believe it's not aligned" with the No Child Left Behind law," she said.

Dr. Patricia Cunningham, one of the program's authors, said studies showed little difference between phonics programs, and that what was important was doing phonics instruction systematically as part of a broader program.

But Louisa Moats, who advises states on applications for federal reading instruction funds, predicted that Month by Month would not pass muster. "It's just not in line with what we know works," she said.

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company