

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

Why Is America Being Inundated by Disinformation About Dyslexia?

On Sunday evening, April 19, 1992, the CBS network aired a film about dyslexia, starring Kirk Douglas, entitled "The Secret." The secret, of course, was that Douglas, a retired cranberry grower on Cape Cod, had spent his entire life hiding the fact that he couldn't read. He never really understood why he couldn't learn to read in school even though he knew he was not stupid. He simply was afflicted with this handicap which only his wife and best friend knew about. Now that his wife was dead, only his friend knew.

Douglas is more or less resigned to his fate as a lifelong illiterate until he learns that his little grandson in the fourth grade is having a problem similar to his: learning to read. The parents are summoned to the school by the boy's teacher who informs them that their son has a "learning disability" called dyslexia. She suggests that the boy be tested by the school to confirm her diagnosis. The father, Douglas's son, vehemently objects to any such testing. He tells the teacher in no uncertain terms that his son is perfectly normal physically and mentally and is an outstanding athlete.

But Douglas realizes that his grandson is afflicted with the same disability he has and decides that he must do something about it. He must convince his grandson that simply because he can't read doesn't mean that he's stupid. Only a test will prove that.

Grandpa's daughter-in-law informs him that the boy can be privately tested in Boston at a hospital that has a dyslexia clinic. (The hospital shown in the film is the Massachusetts General Hospital which does, indeed, have a dyslexia clinic.) The cost of the test is \$1,200 which the young family can't afford. Grandpa Douglas decides to pay for the test. He arranges to take the boy to Boston without his son's knowledge. And so off they go to the hospital in Beantown and are anxiously awaiting the boy's appointment when father bursts into the waiting room, grabs the boy in a fit of anger and takes him back to Cape Cod.

Douglas, alone at the hospital, doesn't know what to do. But when the call for the appointment comes, Douglas decides that he might as well take the test himself to find out what's wrong with him.

The doctor, a sympathetic female, gives

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him a battery of tests which determine that he is quite intelligent. But she does discover that he can't read. He can't sound out a simple nonsense word. She tells him that he has dyslexia, that he was born that way, and that nobody knows what causes it. She also tells him that it is hereditary, which explains to Grandpa why grandson has this condition. It's all in the genes. The doctor says that there is no cure for dyslexia but that there are ways of improving one's reading by learning to sound out words.

Armed with this new knowledge, Grandpa returns to Cape Cod where he argues with his son who resents the fact that Grandpa never helped him with his homework when he was a child. Of course, his father never told him the reason why he couldn't help him: he couldn't read. The son still doesn't know his father's secret.

But it all comes out when Grandpa, who is nominated to run for town selectman, is embarrassed when forced to read written questions at a public meeting. The grandson, recognizing that Grandpa can't read, runs out of the meeting hall devastated by having been lied to by his grandfather. Grandpa then decides to make a public confession about his reading disability at the next town meeting. He does so in a very tense scene in which he turns down the nomination, but his backers, one of whom is in a wheelchair, decide that this handicap should not stand in the way of his running for selectman.

Now that the secret is out, Douglas's son realizes why his father never helped him with his homework, and grandson also forgives Grandpa. The boy's father agrees to have the boy tested and put in Special Ed. And they all live happily ever after.

After the film, Barbara Bush appeared and made a few inane remarks about dyslexia and recommended some books to read on the subject.

There was not a word in the film about how children are taught to read in school, not a word about the 60-year debate between advocates of intensive phonics and look-say, not a hint of the possibility that dyslexia can be artificially induced by faulty teaching methods. Contrary to what the doctor said in the film, no one is born with dyslexia, it is *not* hereditary, and we *do* know the cause of the disability. It is the result of a teaching disability, not a learning disability.

The Experts Spread Disinformation

How is it possible that a multimillion dollar film, beautifully photographed, and acted by an excellent cast, can be based on such blatant misinformation and disinformation? The answer is simple. When the producers want to know something about dyslexia, whom do they turn to? The experts. And who are the experts? They are the people in the educational and research establishments with a pipeline to the federal treasury which is financing all of this research on dyslexia. And the official line of the official researchers is that dyslexia is an inherited dysfunction of the central nervous system. (See BEL March 1992.)

Far be it for Hollywood producers to seek a second opinion. After all, even Barbara Bush goes along with this nonsense. And so the First Lady, who could have been the most powerful instrument in getting the truth about dyslexia to the public, has simply become an accomplice in the dissemination of falsehood.

On the morning after the film, Monday, April 20, the *Boston Globe* published a long, front-page article on dyslexia conveying in print the same disinformation conveyed by the film. The reporter wrote:

Dyslexia remains puzzling in many ways after more than 50 years of research. But now, several longterm studies are yielding answers pointing in the

same direction, so scientists for the first time can agree on what dyslexia is, and where to look for its fundamental cause.

In simple terms, dyslexics have reading and writing problems because their brains are innately different.

Comment: This is the most absurd assertion about dyslexia we have read to date! There is no evidence whatever that the brain of a dyslexic is any different from the brain of any other normal person. The article goes on:

This biological stumbling block means dyslexic youngsters don't develop good skills matching letter groups in words to the sounds of speech.

Comment: The stumbling block is not "biological." It is associational. The reader has learned or been taught to associate whole words with ideas and images instead of being taught to associate letters and syllables with sounds. This is an initial learning problem caused by whole-word teaching methods and the memorization of a sight vocabulary. Our March 1992 BEL proved this beyond the shadow of a doubt. The reporter goes on:

"It makes it impossible for them to learn unambiguously the sound structure of their language," said Dr. Albert Galaburda, a neurologist at Harvard Medical School and Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. "And this is a prerequisite for learning to read and write with ease."

Scientists have labeled this ability, lacking in dyslexic individuals, "phonological awareness." Phonemes are the combinations of letters that in effect are coded units for different sounds. Dyslexics have trouble learning the letter-sound code and storing the various combinations in their memories.

Even if dyslexics discover ways of compensating for their disability, perhaps by acquiring a vocabulary of certain words they know how to identify and pronounce, the brain abnormality remains for life. A simple way to bring the problem out is to ask a dyslexic to pronounce a nonsense word — which requires him or her to "sound it out."

Comment: The reporter assumes that dyslexics memorize whole words as a way of compensating for their innate disability. It's the other way around. It's the memorization of a sight vocabulary that creates the block against phonological awareness. How would anyone be able to decipher a nonsense word unless he or she had been taught intensive, systematic phonics? No one is born with phonological knowledge. No one is born knowing how to sound out words. It has to be taught. When Kirk Douglas was asked by the doctor in the movie to sound out the nonsense word, his failure to do so was not an indication that he had been born with a disability. It indicated that he had never been taught intensive, systematic phonics. The reporter continues:

For example, when a college-educated dyslexic who was studied at Massachusetts General Hospital by language disability researcher John Locke was asked to sound out "clabont," the volunteer pronounced it "calaboat."

Comment: Gee whiz, what's so bad about that? Whole Language guru Prof. Ken Goodman says that if a child sees the word *horse* and says *pony* that's perfectly all right, and he doesn't call that kid dyslexic! Frank Smith, Goodman's co-guru in the Whole Language movement, writes in *Reading Without Nonsense*:

"We can read — in the sense of understanding print — without producing or imagining sounds. . . . I want to show that phonics, which means teaching a set of spelling-to-sound correspondence rules that permit the 'decoding' of written language into speech, just does not work. To expect any readers, and especially beginners, to learn and rely upon phonics is to distract them with involved and unreliable procedures that are in fact largely unnecessary." (p. 49)

"How is it possible to recognize written

words without sounding them out? The answer is that we recognize words in the same way that we recognize all the other familiar objects in our visual world — trees and animals, cars and houses, cutlery, crockery, furniture and faces — that is, 'on sight.' . . . The fact that written words are made up of letters that seem in themselves to be related to sound is as irrelevant to their recognition as the fact that most automobiles have their model name stuck on them somewhere." (p. 55)

In other words, the researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital had no business asking someone to read a nonsense word like "clabont." It doesn't mean anything, and therefore, according to whole language philosophy, it isn't worth reading.

What is sad is that, apparently, none of the experts on dyslexia, such as Dr. Galaburda, ever heard of Kenneth Goodman or Frank Smith. They are obviously unaware of the lunacy that now pervades primary reading instruction in American schools. Their obsession with the supposedly abnormal brains of the dyslexics has blinded them to far simpler explanations for widespread reading disability, such as the harmful teaching methods being used in the schools. Lunatic teachers do create problems for their students. The article in the *Boston Globe* continues:

Why as many as 12 million people in the United States have this brain-based difficulty to some degree isn't yet clear, but studies comparing rates of dyslexia in identical and fraternal twins, as well as longterm surveys of families, suggest that genes play an important role in many cases of dyslexia.

Comment: Isn't it possible that twins taught by the same look-say or whole-language teacher would develop the same reading problems? Of course, the reason why so much emphasis is being put on the notion

that dyslexics have some innate brain dysfunction is to get the educators off the hook and provide lucrative research opportunities for unemployed psychologists and medical scientists. As long as they can blame reading problems on the students themselves and not the education system and its teaching methods, the schools can keep on getting away with murder, and the federal government will keep pouring millions of dollars into "research" on this mysterious disorder called dyslexia. The reporter writes:

While researchers now more or less agree on the basic flaw in language processing, and that the disability is inherited, and that it doesn't necessarily affect more boys than girls (as was thought until recently), there's still no magic bullet in sight. . . .

"Our data show we can predict this problem at least as early as kindergarten, and that early intervention, in the first or second grade, helps protect [against severe reading problems] to some extent," said Dr. Frank Wood, professor of neurology at Bowman Gray School of Medicine in North Carolina.

Dr. Wood, it should be noted, is the recipient of a \$3-million grant from Uncle Sam to conduct research into the genetic causes of dyslexia. The reporter writes:

One reason for recent progress in dyslexia research is that the federal government has boosted support of several long-term studies. The overall goal is, first, to bring some order to the chaotic field, so that all researchers will be talking about the same thing when they say "dyslexia." . . .

The next decade should see exciting developments in pinning down precisely the cause of dyslexia, say researchers who are using high-tech scanners and instruments to measure blood flow in different parts of the brain to search for flaws in the ways dyslexics process information.

Some of the newest findings are being reported by Paula Tallal at the Center for Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience at Rutgers University. She said in an interview that her findings suggest that the troubles dyslexics have can be traced to a fundamental problem that's even more basic than phonological weakness.

The problem that Tallal has identified is that

dyslexics' brains can't process information that changes quickly. . . .

Currently she and her colleagues are looking for abnormalities in brain structure in dyslexics that could account for the processing difficulties. "I think this approach has great potential," she said. "It's a new frontier, and I think there are tremendous possibilities for developing new techniques to get around the problem."

Comment: No doubt, Ms. Tallal and her colleagues are the recipients of some of that federal cash which is helping them explore their "new frontier." Have any of them ever heard of Dr. Samuel T. Orton, the neuropathologist who identified the whole-word method as the cause of dyslexia back in 1929? In an article entitled "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability," published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* of February 1929, Dr. Orton wrote:

I wish to emphasize at the beginning that the strictures which I have to offer here do not apply to the sight method of teaching reading as a whole but only to its effects on a restricted group of children for whom, as I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover I believe that this group is one of considerable educational importance both because of its size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life.

Of course, since 1929 we have learned much more about the damage that the look-say, whole-word, or sight method can inflict on children learning to read. That the teaching method is the direct cause of reading disability, or dyslexia, was made quite clear by Rudolf Flesch in his famous book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, published in 1955. In that book Flesch wrote:

The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is

totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how. Johnny's only problem was that he was unfortunately exposed to an ordinary American school.

Flesch then explained how in the early 1930s, the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in American schools. They threw out the alphabetic-phonics method and put in a new whole-word, sight method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Flesch argued that when you impose an ideographic teaching method on an alphabetic writing system, you get reading disability. And the disability can become so severe that medical doctors assume that there is something wrong with the child's brain.

We get further corroboration of Flesch's insights from the late Dr. Hilde Mosse who treated hundreds of reading-disabled children during her career. She wrote in her book, *The Complete Handbook of Children's Reading Disorders*:

The harmfulness of the whole-word method was exposed for the first time only in 1955 by Rudolf Flesch in his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The pressure exerted on educators since the appearance of that book, and devastating statistics of children with high school diplomas who cannot read, write, or spell have slowly led to the sporadic reintroduction of phonetic methods. But teachers themselves do not learn phonetics anymore and therefore cannot teach it.

I have myself experienced how much fighting rages about the whole-word method. In May 1960, I attended the Congress of the International Reading Association. Teachers, reading specialists, school principals, and administrators were present in our discussion group. But no discussion got started. I finally said that as a psychiatrist I felt I could discuss something they seemed so anxious to avoid. I spoke about the whole-word method as a cause for reading, writing, and spelling disorders. The reaction was astonishing. It was as though a floodgate had opened, and teachers and others spoke freely, openly, and passionately. They described how they (especially

the older teachers) had been aware of the great harmfulness of the whole-word method for a long time, but that they had been completely helpless and powerless since they were being forced to use this method. Those teachers who in desperation had the courage to teach phonics had to do so secretly. Some even had to tell the children to do something else quickly whenever someone entered the classroom. (p. 121)

Concerning the anti-phonics bias of our education system, Professor Pat Groff of San Diego State University has written in his book, *Preventing Reading Failure*:

This short history of the traditional objection to phonics helps put into perspective the ideas of a more recent group of opponents to phonics. This latter group of negative critics of phonics has appeared in the wake of Chall's report in 1967 of the research on the relative merits of phonics. This present group is spearheaded by Frank Smith, whose books on reading provide the theory and the rationale for this new anti-phonics movement, and by Kenneth Goodman, who censures phonics in most of his writings about the techniques of reading instruction. . . .

These erroneous comments about phonics are found in many educational journals, in books written for teachers on the methodology of reading instruction, and even in monographs on reading instruction sponsored by the two largest organizations in the world concerned with the development of literacy — the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English.

The extent and frequency of these denunciations of phonics and the prestigious sources that publish them doubtlessly have misled numerous reading educators into believing their validity.

Obviously, none of the researchers mentioned in the *Boston Globe* article are aware of the Great Debate that has been raging among teachers and professors of reading since 1955. Why are they so ignorant? Is it, perhaps, not in their economic interest to find out the real cause of dyslexia? Is it, perhaps, that they don't read much of anything outside their narrow field of vision? Or are they part of the whole vicious scheme to reduce America to a nation of driveling illiterates? Certainly, they can find

the relevant works of Orton, Flesch, Chall, Mosse, Groff, and even Blumenfeld in many university libraries. The books haven't been burned yet! Whatever the reason for their blind ignorance, the public is being inundated by harmful disinformation that is affecting millions of children negatively and costing the taxpayers billions of dollars. But what is truly alarming is the degree of public ignorance and the tremendous barriers that exist in the press and within the education establishment to the dissemination of the truth. When a nation's leaders so readily succumb to self-deception, only tragedy can result.

Is the Dumbing-Down Deliberate?

Charlotte Iserbyt, our longtime friend from Bath, Maine, who once worked for the U.S. Department of Education, wrote an article entitled "Reading: The Civil-Rights Issue of the 1990's," which was published in the *Camden Herald*, July 6, 1989. Her Representative, Joseph E. Brennan, had it reprinted in the *Congressional Record* of October 23, 1989. The pertinent passages read as follows:

Is the failure to teach our children to read and write not the most important civil rights issue facing our nation today?

How can our children enjoy the fruits of freedom if they are illiterate? Their ability to express themselves, defend themselves, support themselves and their families, to be independent human beings unable to be manipulated by others, all depend upon their ability to read and write.

Shouldn't we attack this civil-rights problem with at least the same vigor we attacked racial discrimination in our society?

The whole-language/look-say method of reading instruction must be stopped dead in its tracks if we truly want to cure the nation's illiteracy problems.

Alarming information has come to light that suggests that the federal government has given the discredited whole-language/look-say method of

reading instruction its stamp of approval, thereby taking the most important *first* step toward a national curriculum, since reading is the foundation of literacy. . . .

The Department of Education's alignment of a national reading examination to one specific [whole-language] method of teaching reading will assure that our children will be unable to function as responsible citizens. The education establishment is already reacting to this unwritten mandate, and the whole-language illiteracy virus is sweeping across the nation, with many teachers and colleges . . . already mandating its use.

Why are desperate parents finding it absolutely impossible to get rid of whole-language reading instruction? Because unbeknownst to them, the deindustrialization of America, with its accompanying transfer of millions of American jobs overseas, has allowed the social-change agents to redefine literacy and to call for new methods, such as whole language and the use by elementary students of calculators, better suited to the needs of an information/service-oriented society.

In a 1981 speech before the top 52 executives in Northern Telecom's worldwide corporation, Harvard Professor Anthony Oettinger said: "The present 'traditional' concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write. But the real question that confronts us today is: How do we help citizens function well in their society? How can they acquire the skills necessary to solve their problems? Do we really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in 'a fine round hand' when they have a five-dollar handheld calculator or a word processor to work with? Or do we really have to have everybody literate — writing and reading in the traditional sense — when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication? It is the traditional idea that says certain forms of communication, such as comic books, are 'bad.' But in the modern context of functionalism they may not be all that bad."

Two well-known reading researchers, Harman and Sticht, said in 1987, "Many companies have moved operations to places with cheap, relatively poorly educated labor. What may be crucial, they say, is the dependability of a labor force and how well it can be managed and trained — not its general educational level, although a small cadre of highly educated creative people is essential to innovation and growth. Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading and moving low-income families into the middle class."

Comment: The above says it all.

Widespread illiteracy among Americans is now being accepted not only by the educators who gain economic benefits through the growth of Special Ed programs, but also by our business leaders who are being persuaded by our educators that a low level of literacy is about all that we can hope for and that "oral communication" will flower as a result.

"Do we really have to have everybody literate . . . in the traditional sense?" asks Professor Oettinger. Who is the "we"? Certainly not the parents! The "we" are the educational and corporate leaders. They may prefer the new illiteracy, but parents, you can be sure, want the old literacy. The tragedy is that the parents have let the "leaders" make the educational decisions for their children which will affect their lives.

It is only when parents assume the responsibility for their children's education, such as in the homeschool movement, that we can find out what parents really want. I have yet to meet a parent who prefers a "flowering of oral communication" in place of true literacy in the traditional sense. Parents do not send their children to school to learn how to read comic books. But when educational leaders reject traditional literacy in favor of comic books, they are telling us that either they don't know how to teach reading or that they have no intention of teaching reading.

The reason why so many blacks in the inner cities are so frustrated and angry is because their schools have permanently crippled them intellectually, relegating them to lives of poverty. As Harman and Sticht said, "Ending discrimination and changing values are probably more important than reading and moving low-income families into the middle class." Doesn't that explain the explosion in Los Angeles? Haven't our educators created social volcanoes in our inner cities made up of people crippled and

frustrated by a government education system determined to prevent them from becoming literate? All it takes is a Rodney King incident to touch off an explosion.

Successful members of the minorities are those who have mastered literacy and moved into the middle class. The rest are left to fester in the inner cities. Of course, literacy in and of itself is no guarantee that an individual will not behave criminally. But it does mean that thousands of youths will be able to make better lives for themselves and will not be drawn into delinquent, anti-social behavior. They will be able to realize their ambitions.

Only American parents can stop their government from destroying their children's minds. They can do that by refusing to send their children to the government schools.

Court Clears Way for Condoms In New York City Schools

A New York state court has dismissed a lawsuit attempting to block New York City's ground-breaking condom-distribution program in public high schools. The program, which went into effect last November, allows students at certain city schools to receive condoms in school without the consent of their parents. The school system expects to expand the program to all the city's high schools within the year.

The suit, filed in state supreme court in the borough of Staten Island by several parents and a school-board member who voted against the plan, alleged that the program violates state law because it does not require students to obtain the consent of their parents before receiving a condom. The judge, however, ruled that, because the condom-availability program does not qualify as a "health service" under state law, no parental consent is required. (*Educ. Wk.*, 5/6/92)

Planned Parenthood Files Suit to Prevent Teaching of Abstinence

Six families and Planned Parenthood of Northeast Florida have filed a suit against the Duval County school board in an attempt to block the use of a controversial sex-education program that espouses abstinence. In the suit, filed last week in a state circuit court, the plaintiffs charge that the "Teen-Aid" program violates Florida's "teen pregnancy" statute, which stipulates that districts offer comprehensive education on the prevention of pregnancy, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The curriculum now is taught to 7th graders [13-year-olds] in the 115,000-student district. Linda Lanier, the president of the Planned Parenthood chapter, called the curriculum incomplete, inaccurate, racially and sexually biased, and embodying a religious point of view.

"The Teen-Aid program is a 'just say no or die' curriculum," Ms. Lanier said. "It believes that death should be the appropriate punishment for the sexually curious."

A legal adviser to the school board said that the curriculum adheres to state law and that the board has the authority to choose curricular material and will continue to use Teen-Aid unless otherwise ordered by the court. (*Education Week*, 5/6/92)

Vital Quote

"The philosophy of statism is anti-Christian to the core. The necessity of our day is not political action but a return to Biblical faith. On any but a Biblical doctrine of man, the state increases its power and plays the role of god and savior over man."

— R. J. Rushdoony
Christianity and the State (p. 23)