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by Steve Timmer
Feb 22, 2023, 6:00 PM



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The Great Literacy Food Fight II

Here's the first story, which you should read for background. This one will focus more specifically on Minnesota House bill [HF629](#) and [LETRS®](#). (The companion to HF629 is [SF1273](#) in the Minnesota Senate.)

In the last session of the Legislature in 2022, then senator and education chair Roger Chamberlain wanted to put \$30 million into the LETRS® program *by name*. He didn't get it.

Chamberlain came in for criticism for naming a company as the beneficiary of the state's largess. It wasn't very, *je ne sais quoi*, competitive. This session, HF629 doesn't identify a company by name – exactly – but it makes Chamberlain look like a cheapskate, at least in the bill's current form. The bill pencils in \$100 million (presumably for the biennium), divided this way:

Of this amount, \$30,000,000 must be used to train teachers in the science of reading. The remaining amount must be used to pay for costs related to the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.123, or to *purchase books and other instructional materials based on the science of reading*. [emphasis added]

If you read HF629, you will see the term “science of reading” quite often. Where did that come from? [It came from the LETRS® website](#), or from LETRS® lobbyists who roamed the halls of Capitol. Never doubt it.

LETRS® is owned by Lexia Learning, an indirect subsidiary of Veritas Capital.

The “science of reading” according to LETRS® is, of course, phonics. Even though the “science” is hardly settled.

Under the bill:

The commissioner of education must make available to school districts and charter schools a list of approved literacy curricula that are *based on the science of reading*. [emphasis added] The commissioner must, upon request, provide support to school districts seeking to implement an approved

curriculum. A school district or charter school must use a literacy curriculum that has been approved by the commissioner.

Who do you think the commissioner is going to pick to scarf up a lot of that \$70 million, or the \$30 million for teacher training, too? Guess. No, go ahead and guess. The bill also removes this language from current law:

~~Nothing in this subdivision limits the authority of a school district to select a school's reading program or curriculum.~~

The upshot of all of this is that all public districts (including charter schools) in the state will be required to teach “the science of reading” as defined by LETRS® and probably pick it as a vendor whether it wants to or not, and whether or not it already has a successful reading program in place.

Before you say, *So what the prob?*, consider, as intimated in the previous story, that the educational expert support for a phonics-heavy reading program is hardly monolithic. I will quote a little more from the opinion piece by David Reinking, Victoria J. Risko and George G. Hruby in the [Valerie Strauss column linked in that story](#).

It is tempting to misappropriate science in claiming a higher ground in an argument, especially one framed as a war [between phonics and whole language]. Unfortunately, some have naively suggested that science has unequivocally resolved how reading must be taught to every child and that those who disagree are science deniers.

Not only is that conclusion unwarranted, it is quintessentially unscientific. Among scientists, scientific certainty is an oxymoron and the bar for even approaching certainty is extremely high. The [true] science of reading is more about reducing ignorance than finding ultimate, immutable truths applicable to every child. In the reading wars, scientific certainty is often used rhetorically to deny reasonable differences and cut off healthy debate, turning science into scientism.

And consider this:

[M]any decisions about teaching reading are necessarily practical and informed only marginally by the science of underlying reading processes. Phonics, again, is a good example. English is among the most irregularly spelled languages. (For a satirical rendering, [click on this](#)). [*You want to click this link, believe me, LeftMN readers.*] Further, the most frequently used words in English — words that appear often, even in simple texts, and thus that children cannot avoid — have a high percentage of ambiguous or irregular letter-to-sound spellings.

For example, why isn't “to” pronounced like “so” and “go”? What about “have” compared to “save,” or comparing “one,” “done,” and “lone”? Or, “some” and “home”? Frequent words like these can quickly muddy the phonics waters.

Thus, many educators reasonably teach a small set of high-frequency, irregularly spelled words as special cases. Doing so is a practical, sensible pedagogical decision, not one that is anti-phonics, taking sides in a war, or, necessarily justified by scientific evidence about the brain's role in reading.

Another issue is that in an irregularly spelled language like English, teaching phonics often means introducing children to specialized vocabulary, including terms and concepts such as the following: vowel, consonant, long and short sounds, split/consonant/vowel digraphs, blends, clusters, schwa sound, diphthongs, silent letters, open/closed syllables, hard and soft sounds, r-controlled vowels, etc. The need for these terms reflects the complexity English spelling, adding a conceptual burden to teaching and learning phonics and raising a question about when phonics instruction may have diminishing returns. [*And whether it is a turnoff to student readers, especially reluctant ones, ed.*]

Reinking, Risko and Hruby are hardly alone in their misgivings about the phonics bandwagon. [Consider the abstract of this article](#):

There is a widespread consensus in the research community that reading instruction in English should first focus on teaching letter (grapheme) to sound (phoneme) correspondences rather than adopt meaning-based reading approaches such as whole language instruction. That is, initial reading instruction should emphasize systematic phonics. In this systematic review, I show that this conclusion is not justified based on (a) an exhaustive review of 12 meta-analyses that have assessed the efficacy of systematic phonics and (b) summarizing the outcomes of teaching systematic phonics in all state schools in England since 2007. The failure to obtain evidence in support of systematic phonics should not be taken as an argument in support of whole language and related methods, but rather, it highlights the need to explore alternative approaches to reading instruction.

Bowers, J.S. Reconsidering the Evidence That Systematic Phonics Is More Effective Than Alternative Methods of Reading Instruction. *Educ Psychol Rev* **32**, 681–705 (2020).

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It makes me sad, really, that the birthplace of the English language must serve as a cautionary tale about a headlong rush into a territory mapped out by the subsidiary of a private equity company.

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Update 2/25: Even the HF629 chief author says the bill is revolutionary. This is from Heather Edelson's constituent letter this week:

The Read Act Hearing

My bill to massively overhaul how we teach literacy in Minnesota by basing it off of structured literacy or science of reading had its first hearing last week. The Read Act is a legislative effort to take what we know now about research, human development, and cognitive science on how people learn to read – and apply it to meaningful public policy.

Edelson constituent letter

Revolutionary zealotry must always be approached with caution.

Update 3/9: Here's a paper just published in the *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* at Columbia University. It's very readable, as you'd probably expect from experts in literacy, and worth your time.

[Legislating Phonics: Settled Science or Political Polemics?](#)

[A]n increasing number [of education bills] define, endorse, and sometimes mandate instructional approaches—a legislative excursion into matters that in other fields of practice, such as medicine or law, are left to certified professionals and the standards set by their professional organizations or accrediting agencies. In that sense, the existence of such laws suggests a perception of a problem with the teaching of reading of such consequence that it demands legislative action. In so doing, it moves professional practice into the political realm, subject to all the forces and vested interests inherent to that domain.

Bingo.