

Writing on the Wall: The Kids Can't Read
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When it comes to reading, we are not in Lake Wobegone anymore. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress our students are **no longer above average**. We are facing the tragic results of the failure to teach reading effectively to our kids. How and when we respond matters.

When Boeing faced a tragedy caused by the failure of its 737 Max airplane, the company was required to rewrite and recertify the operating instructions for the plane, recertify the airworthiness of every plane in service, and retrain and recertify every pilot that flies them. When it comes to reading, we need to do the same – adopt an approach to reading instruction that we know works, certify that every school is using that approach, recertify every teacher preparation program that prepares teachers to teach reading, and retrain and recertify every teacher in every school. With the multi-billion dollar surplus that state has saved up we can afford to this now and cannot afford not to. (StarTribune December 10, 2022 'Record Surplus Should Spur Innovation')

Reading education in Minnesota is a tragedy on a scale bigger than the 737 Max. The state, the department of education, our teacher preparation programs, and local school districts have been in denial about the scale of the tragedy and the failure of the methods they expected teachers to use to teach reading.

Today in Minnesota there are over 500,000 students who cannot read proficiently. These students are in every school and every grade across the state. They are rich, middle income and poor. They are of every racial and ethnic background – white and people of color. They are 60-70% of all the students in our schools. Before they graduate, they are over-identified as needing special education and over-represented in cases involving discipline, suspension, and truancy. After they graduate – and most of them do – they can read well enough to get by, but not well enough to get ahead. This failure has perpetuated and massively increased the gaps in achievement between white students and students of color and between poorer students and their higher income peers. In other words when it comes to reading, we are failing most of our students, and failing some much worse than others, when we should not be failing anyone.

What's true today was true last year, and five years ago, and 10 years ago, and even 25 years ago. For over two lifetimes most of our students have not achieved proficiency in reading. How could this have gone on for so long? And what can we do about it now?

There can only be two explanations for the inability of our kids to achieve proficiency in reading. Either they are not capable of learning - or we are not capable of teaching them. There is no evidence that our kids can't learn. They learn every day – that's what kids do. Sure, some kids come with challenges, home lives or socio-economic hurdles that make it harder. Yet

there are plenty of examples of these very kids doing very well in settings and with teachers that know what to do and how to do it.

At the heart of this on-going tragedy is a war, an ideological battle over how to teach reading. This was a war among adults for which our children have paid the ultimate price.

Within days of first becoming the superintendent in Minneapolis I was warned to 'stay out of the reading wars, they take no prisoners.' I had no idea what they were talking about but quickly learned. The winners were the advocates of something called 'whole language'. They believed that reading was best taught 'in context.' That readers would figure out a word by looking at the clues around it – the rest of the story, pictures, and other clues. Skeptics argued that whole language turned reading into a giant guessing game that didn't work.

On the other side were the advocates of phonics. They believed that learning to read meant learning to decode – sounding out words by learning the sounds of letters individually and in combination. The opponents of phonics argued that it was old fashioned and boring and didn't work.

The whole language advocates won. The phonics books were thrown away or hidden away (some teachers knew they needed them because they worked for many kids.) The winners were reinforced by teacher preparation programs that made whole language the standard for cohort after cohort of new teachers. They were further reinforced by the materials that teachers were expected to use and that assumed that whole language was 'the right way.'

The problem was it did not work. Today 100,000s of kids in our schools cannot read proficiently and we have graduated 100,000s more who can't either – many of whom ended up in low paying jobs, not able to go to college, or in jail where 70-85% of those who are incarcerated cannot read.

In response to the evidence of failure the whole language advocates have adopted a compromise that they now call 'balanced instruction' – whole language plus a little phonics. There is little evidence to suggest that this version is much better than the original. What there is substantial evidence for is the Science of Reading that emerged from careful research on what works and why when it comes to teaching children to read. The Science of Reading begins with phonics to decode words as a basis for fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. (StarTribune November 5, 2022 "The story we've been sold about how kids learn to read" and November 19, 2022 "How Minnesota's largest districts are teaching struggling readers")

The research on the Science of Reading tells us what to do in the face of Minnesota's reading tragedy, but how do we get it done? We can start most easily and immediately by making the Science of Reading the unequivocal standard in our teacher preparation programs. Every program should be specifically recertified as to the content, quality, and effectiveness of their

preparation of new teachers to employ the Science of Reading. We have started down this path – but only just.

Next the state should certify or recertify the content and quality of the reading programs and materials adopted in our schools. Teachers should not be expected to use any curriculum that is not specifically based on the Science of Reading and has been tested for its effectiveness.

Most importantly, however, we need to retrain and recertify our teachers in the Science of Reading so that they can do what they have always wanted to do – make the difference that matters in the lives of their students. Now is the time. Dedicate this summer to retraining. Challenge every teacher to master the Science of Reading over 10 weeks and reward them for doing so. Pay them \$1000 a week. Then assess their mastery at the end of the summer. Pay every Master of the Science of Reading an additional \$10,000 and provide them with a credential that they can use to assure parents that their children are being taught the right things the right way.

Finally, we need to address the needs of all of those kids who are already way behind. What they need is intensive, high dosage tutoring. To be sure they get it, assign 10 of those students to one of our teachers for the duration of the summer program. Doing so will give teachers the practical experience in using the Science of Reading that they need and give the students the chance to leap forward in their learning.

What would all this cost – probably about \$1 billion. The state just announced that it has \$12 billion for one-time investments (versus ongoing expenses). This investment would transform reading education in Minnesota and generate a far higher return to our students, our communities, our businesses, and the state as a whole than any alternative. We can afford to end the Minnesota's ongoing reading tragedy starting now and we cannot afford not to.

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