The Road Map To

Real Reform In Education

February 1, 1996 by Phyllis Schlafly

Every now and then a book comes along, such as Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" or Ralph Nader's "Unsafe At Any Speed," that dramatically alters the focus of an entire industry. "Teaching Our Children to Read" by Bill Honig can be such a book. It could change our entire educational system, not because the book will be a best-seller, but because of the author's credibility among educators.

Honig is no hero to conservatives, or to disaffected parents demanding school choice, or even to critics demanding school "standards" and "reform." He was State Superintendent of Public Instruction for California, 1983-1993, where he presided over a school system that exemplified all the failures and abuses we've been complaining about for years.

Apparently, when he left office two years ago, Honig sincerely set about to find out why public schoolchildren are not learning how to read. He started from the reasonable assumption that "the first and foremost job of elementary school is to teach children to read."

The most important point Honig makes, repeated at least a dozen times, is that a child absolutely must be "reading beginning books by mid-first grade." Honig emphasizes that those who miss out in the early first grade need "organized intervention" immediately, because otherwise they "almost never recover."

Reading success depends on the child developing the ability to pick out the smallest "sound chunks" that make up words. Honig says that "the amount of time a student is engaged in phonics instruction is highly predictive of subsequent reading achievement."

The discipline manifested in Honig's book is extraordinary. It contains no confessions, no mea culpas, no I-told-you-sos, no recriminations, no put-downs, no pejoratives, no assessing of credit or blame, no targeting of enemies, no sanctimonious self- righteousness.

Honig's book is just a straightforward explanation, based on voluminous research and empirical evidence, of how children can and should be taught to read. It's a fair inference that its message is a plea for the

schools to get going on this task because, if the schools fail in this preeminent mission, nothing else matters.

A Great Debate has been going on for years between the advocates of phonics (i.e., teaching the child to sound out the syllables of the English language and put them together like building blocks) and the advocates of Whole Language (i.e., teaching the child to guess at the words by looking at the pictures and to substitute words that fit the context of the story).

Honig calls the phonics-Whole Language debate a "destructive controversy," asserts that it should not be an "either/or" question, and recommends a "balanced" approach. This is a skillful way of assuring that semantics do not screen out the meat of his presentation.

He bows to the Whole Language movement, crediting it with introducing children to "good literature." But Honig reminds us that exposure to good literature "only works if the student actually reads the words correctly -- making mistakes doesn't help."

Then, Honig exposes the Whole Language myth that the child will learn "naturally," without explicit instruction in skills, in the same way that a child learns to talk. He says this false belief is far too prevalent and has had the "disastrous" result that 30% to 40% of urban children can't read at all and more than 50% can't read at their grade level.

Honig explains that "bad habits of guessing" make learning to read much more difficult, and these bad habits cannot be remedied by a sporadic, unsystematic use of phonics. He says that "beginning readers who rely too heavily on contextual clues, such as pictures or the connection of other words in the passage, are distracted from looking at the letters in a word and connecting those letter patterns to words in their minds."

Honig argues for teaching children to write and to spell accurately in the first grade, too. "Inventive spelling" shouldn't be allowed past mid-first grade; children's misspellings should be corrected so erroneous patterns are not reinforced.

How widespread are wrong teaching methods in public schools today? Honig says that "very few instructional programs currently in use provide children with materials designed specifically to connect with systematic and sequenced skills development. In some cases, state, county, district, or university leaders are overtly or subtly antagonistic to the skills components and discourage phonics teaching."

This isn't a book for parents. Honig obviously thinks that parents have no direct role in the mechanics of teaching children to read because that's the job for the public school.

Besides, most parents won't be able to cope with his endless educrat jargon: phonological awareness and processing, phonemic segmentation, explicit skill development strand, word-attack skills, alphabetic principle, orthographic phase, syntactic awareness, and metacognitional and strategic assistance.

But this highfalutin way of talking about phonics is just right for teachers, administrators and policymakers. It's a road map to get them back on the track of teaching children how to read, which should be the schools' number-one mission.