Money Isn't The Solution To Illiteracy

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When former Netscape president James L. Barksdale announced a $100 million gift to promote the teaching of reading in Mississippi, he certainly dramatized the current scandal of illiteracy in America. The gift is big enough to make front-page news, but it's actually a drop in the bucket compared to the enormous sums of money that have been spent on the teaching of reading during the last decade.

Barksdale was motivated to this unprecedented generosity because, he said, "we have 300,000 to 400,000 jobs we can't fill in the industry," primarily because young people don't know how to read. It's hard to see how there could be a more stunning indictment of the public schools because, after all, the schools are just baby-sitters if they don't perform the elementary task of teaching children how to read.

The depressing part of Barksdale's generous gift is that the funds will probably end up training teachers to use the same methods that are a proven failure. There is no indication that he or the University of Mississippi has a clue as to why this tragic situation exists.

If money could end illiteracy, there would be no problem because the schools have had plenty of money. It takes very little money, anyway. All it takes is a good phonics system.

In addition to the billions of state and local taxpayer dollars that annually finance the first grade in tens of thousands of public schools, $118 billion of federal tax dollars have been poured into the Title I program of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act over the last 30 years. This money was supposed to help poor children "overcome inherent barriers that poverty poses to academic achievement" and enable them to catch up with affluent kids.

The federal government's own five-year, $29 million longitudinal study concluded in 1997 that Title I failed to achieve its goals. But Congress continues to increase its funding anyway and Title I's budget is now $10 billion a year.

The premise is fundamentally wrong: poverty doesn't cause illiteracy. In the 18th and 19th centuries when Americans were pitifully poor by today's standards, we had nearly 100 percent literacy. Today up to 50 percent are illiterate or only semi-literate.

Illiteracy is the result of the failure to use phonics to teach children how to read, i.e., teach them the sounds and syllables of the English language so they can put them together like building blocks and read words. Instead, for decades the school establishment has insisted on using a fraudulent method first called "whole word" and later "Whole Language," by which children are taught to guess at words by looking at pictures, skip over words they don't know, substitute words that seem to fit, and predict words based on the context of the story.

This wrong-headed approach was thoroughly exposed in 1955 in the late Rudolf Flesch's landmark book "Why Johnny Can't Read" and in his sequel 30 years later called "Why Johnny Still Can't Read." The research studies that prove the superiority of phonics were compiled in "Learning to Read: The Great Debate" by the late Harvard Professor Jeanne S. Chall in her 1967 book, still considered the definitive analysis of reading research.

In 1996 forty of the nation's top experts on language and reading from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other Massachusetts universities signed a joint letter blasting Whole Language and blaming it for our "serious decline in reading achievement." The letter argued that a mastery of phonics "is fundamental to reading."

Explaining further, these experts wrote: "Written language is a way of noting speech. To become a skilled reader, a learner must master this notation system, learning how the sounds and oral gestures of language correspond to letters and letter groups."

Further corroboration came in 1996 with the publication of "Teaching Our Children to Read" by Bill Honig, former California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. He refuted the Whole Language myth that the child will learn "naturally" in the same way that a child learns to talk, without explicit instruction in skills.

Honig said that this false belief has had the "disastrous" result that 30 to 40 percent of urban children can't read at all and more than 50 percent can't read at their grade level.

Some encouraging straws in the wind have appeared. The Alabama State Board of Education has inaugurated an Alabama Reading Initiative emphasizing the development of phonemic awareness (that's jargon for teaching the individual sounds in words) and the systematic teaching skills needed to decode words.

The Alabama plan includes teacher training, demonstration sites, and a determination to use early intervention with children who need extra help. This year's program involves 80 Alabama schools and the results are encouraging the Board to include another 240 schools next year.

A few brave first-grade teachers, such as Pam Barret of Murietta, California, who was recently honored as an exemplary teacher, have achieved remarkable success using phonics. But not many teachers or schools are willing to buck the Whole Language cult.