Phonics Boom

June 20, 1996 by: Phyllis Schlafly

It's many years overdue, but the scandal of widespread illiteracy has finally become a topic of general discussion and debate, from local newspapers to network TV news. Americans are at last being told the tragic fact that the public schools are failing to teach children how to read.

Our largest and trendiest state suddenly forced the facts of illiteracy into the national news stream. California came in last in national fourth-grade reading tests, set up a state task force to find out why, held legislative hearings, discovered that the state's Whole Language method is a disaster, and earmarked $100 million for new textbooks and teacher training to switch the schools back to phonics.

In order to receive their share of the money, schools will have to give students "systematic explicit phonics instruction, with phonemic awareness, sound-symbol relationships, and decoding." Governor Pete Wilson is even requiring that school districts spend their federal Goals 2000 money on reading instruction.

Wilson's spokesman, Sean Walsh, was blunt. "Whole Language was an utter failure. Our curriculum taught to kindergarten to third-graders, quite frankly, stinks."

The Whole Language system teaches children to guess at words by looking at the pictures on the page, to memorize a few dozen frequently used words, to skip over words they don't know, to substitute words that seem to fit, and to predict the words they think will come next. The child who is taught those bad habits, instead of how to sound out the syllables, will never be able to read big words or become a good reader.

Many schools give high grades and happy report cards to children who are good at guessing and memorizing words, so parents don't realize that their children are being taught to guess instead of to read. Self-esteem is a higher priority than literacy.

A federal agency called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) publishes what is called the Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States. Its recently released report on the 1994 test given to 140,000 students in grades 4, 8 and 12 in public and private schools proves that schoolchildren's reading skills are not only bad, but are getting worse.

Comparing 1992 and 1994, the NAEP results show a significant decline in the percentage of students scoring at or above the "proficient level" and at or above the "basic level," and a significant increase in the percentage of pupils performing below the "basic level." The NAEP tests also show a lack of any positive results from the expensive federal Title I program for the disadvantaged.

How did it happen that the entire public school system abandoned phonics and substituted a guessing system? It's rather easy to date and track the Whole Language system from its official adoption by the state of California in 1987, because California is a model for other states that want to be "progressive."

But Whole Language was not a new idea in 1987; it was just a new name for the system that was already in widespread use called "whole word" or "look-and-say." The mystery as to how that stupid system swept the country, starting in the late 1930s, was revealed in a report aired the first week of June on National Public Radio.

"Look-and-say" came to dominate the schools as a result of a sophisticated marketing plan carried out by Scott Foresman, the publishers of the "Dick and Jane" series of elementary school readers. Scott Foresman sent slick salesmen to every school district to demonstrate how easily children could be taught to "read" the inane "See Dick run" stories that had color illustrations of Dick, Jane and Spot (the dog) doing whatever the one-syllable words described.

By the 1950s, the Dick and Jane readers were, as Newsweek now tells us, "ubiquitous." Rudolf Flesch's 1955 landmark book, "Why Johnny Can't Read," fully exposed the fact that this system is a cheat on everyone.

The typical first-grader already knows the meaning of thousands of big words, such as hamburger, basketball, birthday, toothbrush, and even hippopotamus and Philadelphia. But the child will not be able to read those words unless he is taught the skill of sounding out the syllables. That's what we call phonics.

It is encouraging to see that California is making a massive attempt to abandon the failed Whole Language system and switch to the proven method of phonics. But changing the educational system today will be like trying to change the course of an aircraft carrier with a rowboat.

Parents who want to make sure that their children are not handicapped by the dumbed-down methods

used in most public schools today should assume the task of teaching their own children how to read. It's easy to do if you use intensive, systematic phonics. I did it with my six children, and I urge all parents to do likewise.