

Why is U.S. functionally illiterate?

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“Reading scores are stalled, report says” (March 25 news story) cites a federal report suggesting little academic payoff for the billions of dollars invested in the federally mandated No Child Left Behind program.

Having taught reading for more than 40 years, I was a bit chagrined by the comment of Susan Pimentel, a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the testing: “I think students aren’t reading enough. And I think they aren’t reading enough of the good stuff.” This is only possible if a child is able to read in the first place.

Once a child is taught to read, unassisted, he should then be encouraged to read often until his abilities become internalized and the actual process of decoding and understanding what he is reading becomes automatic. Until then, no matter how many books we place in his lap, nothing will improve this skill. Reading to one’s child benefits in myriad ways: stretches attention span, develops new vocabulary, strengthens imagination, enables the student to anticipate the next step as he bases new scenarios on newly acquired skills in probability. However, it does not teach him to read. Too many of our students are not learning to read well in the early grades; thus, each year that one

PRICE: Despite spending, students struggle to read

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struggles with the printed word marks a year that he will find nothing at all pleasant about the task of reading.

Learning to read is not biological; it is not due to maturity; it should not be left up to the child when "he is ready." It is strictly instructional, and parents could help the teachers in the classroom a great deal by making certain that their little scholars understand the changing of the vowel patterns. Some textbooks give faulty instruction: When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking That works fairly well for long-vowel structures but is absolutely incorrect when encountering diphthongs (cause, loin, feud, boot) or compounds (tri-al, li-on, casu-al, fu-el) when two separate vowel sounds are heard.

I do not know whether to be encouraged or frightened by the recent intentions of many states to begin standardizing instruction so that each student learns the same information as his counterpart in every state. I cannot help but wonder how the textbook industry is going to wiggle around with what could be pending doom for many of them. Why?

The high-frequency word lists of Gates, Kyte, Dolch, Gray, ad infinitum are adopted by different textbook companies, and the stories and literary offerings incorporate these lists. This can cause some difficulty for the student who is studying one publisher's work when he moves to another state or school division using an entirely different publisher's high-

frequency list.

Many parents know the frustration of trying to help their fledgling readers recognize the lists that teachers send home. When a child begins to turn around words (on/no, saw/was, or substitute split for spilt, the for a, a for the, hug for huge, humpty-dumpty for humidity), all too frequently, the teacher and parent begin to suspect that the student may have a learning disability — that he may be dyslexic, possess a central auditory processing disorder, is unable to focus due to an attention-deficit problem.

I am dismayed by the amount of research that has been conducted during the last century and the continuing problems we encounter in teaching our students to read. Some serious investigation needs to be done. Other industrialized nations do not have the same problems in teaching their young. Although it is true that English has the largest vocabulary in the world and is a vegetable soup of all of them, there are linguistic codes to other languages, so it should be perfectly clear that there are keys to our own language that are escaping us.

We have gone through (and still are in) one of the worst recessions in our history, losing countless jobs to the overseas markets. A national effort is in place to stall this hemorrhaging, but I see little hope for the future when many Americans are functionally illiterate, and emerging students are so very, very weak in all areas of their own language.

In a nation that spends as much on education as we do, is this not reprehensible?