

# Prevent Reading Failure In Oregon

## A Fact Sheet

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**Most schools in Oregon now use the same reading approaches that placed California's children last in a national ranking in reading.**

● Oregon's latest statewide language arts adoption (1993) includes only whole language approaches for teaching beginning reading. **Oregon adopted whole language because it was a new trend in education,** not because whole language has achieved superior results anywhere. (State IMS Evaluation Training Sessions, May 3, 1993).

● Most schools in Oregon, including Springfield, Bethel, and Eugene 4J, subsequently purchased whole language programs.

● California set the national whole language trend when it mandated the exclusive use of whole language for teaching beginning reading in 1988.

● **California's 4th-grade children now score last in the national ranking of 39 participating states** in reading according to the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (1994 NAEP READING: A First Look; 1-800-424-1616).

● **Aren't the low scores due to low levels of funding?** No. California falls slightly below the national average in per pupil expenditure. In 1991-2 California spent \$4491 per pupil. Across the states per pupil expenditures ranged from \$2960 (Utah) to \$8645 (New Jersey).

● **Aren't the low scores due to a large population of minorities?** No. Among white children, California scored last; among children of college-educated parents, California scored second from last. Among black children, California scored fourth from last.

● **Has California changed direction on whole language?** Yes. A 1995 California task force on reading concluded that mandating whole language statewide was a mistake. On September 12, 1995, the California legislature passed AB170, which requires the State Board of Education to ensure that the materials it adopts for reading instruction include "systematic, explicit phonics." The vote was unanimous in both legislative chambers.

● **How is it possible that an entire state could make such a terrible mistake?**

California did not use research on what works best for teaching reading to determine what approach to adopt in 1988, although definitive research was available (e.g., Adams, 1988; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). In fact, the California courts found in 1989 that the adoption of whole language violated a "learner verification" law, which required the State Board to adopt only tested approaches. The decision against the Board was upheld all the way through the Court of Appeals to the State Supreme Court. Rather than comply with the law and adopt tested practices though, the legislature removed the law allowing the statewide mandate of the exclusive use of the untested whole language approach to continue.

*"Phonic/linguistic programs used in first grade produced strikingly larger effects than language experience approaches [whole language]."*

Steve Stahl & Pat Miller

*"That direct instruction in alphabetic coding [phonics instruction] facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well established conclusions in all of behavioral science."*

Keith Stanovich

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- **Isn't anyone else concerned about the widespread use of whole language?** Yes. For example, in Massachusetts 40 researchers in linguistics and psycholinguistics from Harvard, MIT, University of Massachusetts, and other research institutions have signed a petition to the state of Massachusetts to reverse the direction of the proposed language arts standards advocating whole language methods for reading instruction.
- **Is Oregon's textbook adoption process the same as California's?** No. The list of programs approved by the Oregon State Board of Education is only a recommended list. Local districts can adopt any programs and materials they wish. However, individual schools must fill out extensive applications to use materials that differ from those adopted at the district level.
- **So why did our state recommend only one reading approach that doesn't work for many children?** State adoption committees did not use scientific research-based criteria in the selection process. Local adoption committees assume that the state-level process is reliable, when it isn't.

### What can we do in Oregon?

#### **1. We need to improve the way we teach beginning reading right now.**

To prevent massive reading failure in Oregon, as occurred in California, Oregon schools must include systematic, explicit phonics in initial reading instruction. Research continues to demonstrate that systematic, explicit phonics achieves superior effects (Aaron, 1995).

#### **2. We need better decision-making processes in education.**

*At the state level*, education agencies should disseminate information on scientific research in reading, the effectiveness of reading programs for different categories of children, and how schools are doing comparatively.

*At the local level*, school communities need to use the information to choose programs and practices that will best meet the needs of all students.

*For teaching beginning reading, research says to:*

- *Develop phonemic awareness.*
- *Teach the relation of sounds and letters.*
- *Teach children how to sound out words.*
- *Provide practice in decodable text.*

Learning To Read/Reading To Learn  
Information Kit (1-800-759-4723)

### How do we do that?

- Copy and share this fact sheet.
- Advocate that
  - 1) schools include systematic, explicit phonics instruction now, and
  - 2) schools, districts, and states adopt sound decision-making processes.

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