

The Inherent Benefit of Structured Literacy

(Public Comment at the Meeting of Maryland State Board of Education, 12/7/15)

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Walter Dunson, and I am Executive Director of Cardinal Reading Strategies, and a member of Right to Read-Maryland.

I stand before you today to advocate for the improvement of teacher preparation for all elementary education teachers on the university level and beyond, as it specifically relates to reading skills acquisition for all students.

The English language is a confluence of eight languages including Latinate, Anglo-Saxon, and Greek. This presents English as a polyglot language with an opaque system of orthography. "Opaque orthography" means that what you see is not necessarily what you get. For example, we have two sounds of "c", "g", and "s", three sounds of "y", three sounds "ch", and three sounds of "-ed", just to name a few examples. There are many more. Without a systematic and explicit approach to reading and spelling the English language, students will have no word attack skills. They will not be able to decode. They will be forced to memorize the 1.6 million words in our lexicon if they want to use the words effectively.

The "whole language" approach, which is the method du jour, is insufficient as it treats the concept of reading like speech. Proponents of 'whole language' feel that, since humans learn to speak their native language through immersion, the act of reading follows a similar pattern and exposure to the printed word leads to the development of reading skills. This is false. A great deal of care and attention to detail must accompany reading instruction because reading is quite different from speech.

In speech, the listener is provided with many clues as to the meaning of the words presented by the speaker. Intonation, pitch, cadence, and body language all provide context clues that assist in the comprehension of auditory signals. Further, children are born equipped with a blueprint for spoken human language called universal grammar. Barring developmental delays that are neurologically-based, children do not require explicit instruction to master the spoken language. Universal grammar aids the child in the task. Additionally, through stages in oral communication, a speaker learns from the surrounding linguistic environment the proper cadence, pitch, and intonation associated with the successful display of language ability, as well as, the rules of grammar that are language specific. This presents speech as a natural process.

Reading is not a natural process. In fact, Dr. Mary Ann Wolf, of Tufts University, asserts that humans are not designed to read. Dr. Sally Shaywitz, of Yale University, states that reading is the most complex of all human functions. The late Dr. Victoria Fromkin concludes that reading is quite different from speech in many respects. First, although humans and our predecessors have used oral language for millions of years, written language is a relatively recent human

construct. In the evolution of writing, we have designated symbols to represent the sounds of spoken language. We have, in essence, created our own code. The sound-symbol correspondence that has been developed for the English language is called "the English code". Our spoken language has a code. Written language, as a representation of spoken language, therefore, must have a code, as well; however, the code for written language is more complex because most visual and auditory cues must be inferred based upon two-dimensional symbolic representations called punctuation. The benefits associated with universal grammar are non-existent.

As children learned the rules for spoken language, they must also learn the rules for written language. To read, a student must be able to translate the written symbol to the corresponding sound that it represents. Reading, or decoding, involves sound-symbol correspondence, and it is not a naturally occurring process. In order for students to properly master the components of our written language, breaking the "code" proves to be a monumental, yet crucial, task. Few students naturally make the association between letters and sounds. The English "code" must be explicitly taught and drilled until the associations from symbol to sound and sound to symbol are automatic.

Dr. Walter Dunson
Executive Director
Cardinal Reading Strategies, LLC
www.cardinalreading.com
202-595-4002