

## ▶▶▶ Focus on Reading

# Whole Language and the Great Plummet of 1987-92

## AN URBAN LEGEND FROM CALIFORNIA

There is compelling evidence that California's low reading scores are related to California's impoverished print environment, not to the introduction of the whole-language approach to literacy, Mr. Krashen points out.

BY STEPHEN KRASHEN

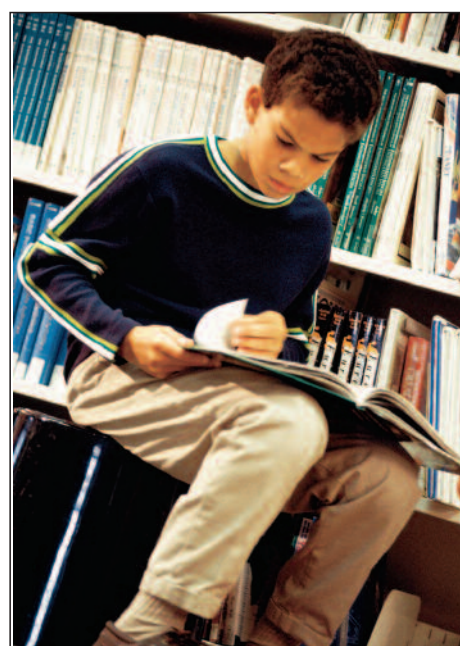
**T**HERE ARE a number of ways to define an urban legend. Here's one from the Urban Legends Research Centre: "An Urban Legend is usually a (good/captivating/titillating/engrossing/incredible/worrying) story that has had a wide audience, is circulated spontaneously, has been told in several forms, and which many have chosen to believe (whether actively or passively) despite the lack of actual evidence to substantiate the story."<sup>1</sup>

I wish to add another urban legend to those that already exist, a legend that I believe ranks with the legend of the alligators living in the sewers of New York City.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to it as the "Plummet Legend." It goes like this. After whole language was introduced in California in 1987, test scores "plummeted" to the point where California's fourth-graders were last in the country in 1992. It makes a good story, if we can judge by the number of times it has been repeated. But this sudden plummet never happened. It is an urban legend, a captivating and worrisome story that has been

told in several forms and that many people have chosen to believe despite the lack of actual evidence.

The Plummet Legend has had serious consequences. It has led to the discrediting of the whole-language approach to literacy and has nurtured a strong movement promoting a "skill-building" approach.<sup>3</sup> I will try to show here both that the evidence does not support this legend and that

*STEPHEN KRASHEN is professor emeritus of education at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.*



the legend is inconsistent with the results of studies of literacy development.

### DID TEST SCORES PLUMMET IN CALIFORNIA?

Here is a more complete version of the Plummet Legend. In 1987 a group of whole-language advocates took over the California Language Arts Framework Committee and brought in whole language. Phonics instruction and

other forms of direct teaching were banned, and language scores plummeted to the point where California's fourth-graders scored last in the country in reading in 1992. California is now recovering from this damage, thanks to a rational, sensible phonics-based approach to reading.

This is not what happened. I served on the California Language Arts Framework Committee in 1987. Phonics teaching was not banned. We simply proposed that language arts should be "literature-based." This is hardly controversial. In fact, I regarded it as part of the definition of language arts.

Did teachers change their ways in California? Nobody really knows. There have been no empirical studies comparing methodology in language arts teaching before and after the 1987 committee met.

Did test scores decline? It is certainly true that California fourth-graders scored last in the country in the fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading in 1992. But this was the first time NAEP scores had been presented by state. It was *assumed* that there had been a decline, but there was no evidence that this was so, for no comparison with earlier test scores was made. Jeff McQuillan examined CAP (California Achievement Program) reading comprehension scores from 1984 to 1990, which I present in Table 1. There is no clear pattern of increases or decreases during these years, which leads to the conclusion that California's reading problem existed well before "whole language" was introduced in 1987. There was no Great Plummet of 1987-92.<sup>4</sup>

McQuillan also provides a convincing explanation for the low scores. There is strong evidence that California's poor performance is related to its print-poor environment. California ranks last in the country in the quality of its school libraries and ranks near the bottom in the quality of its public libraries. In addition, many of its children have very little reading material at home. California ranked ninth in the country in the percentage of children between the ages of 5 and 17 who lived in poverty in 1995, and it ranked near the bottom in the percentage of homes with more than 25 books.<sup>5</sup>

McQuillan's analysis was based on school library data published in 1990 and public library data published in 1995. There has been little change in California since that time.

• A study published in 1990 reported that California's school libraries had 13 books per child; the national average was 18 books per child.<sup>6</sup> In 2001, California ele-

mentary schools had only 12 books per child. Although some of this decline was due to the pruning of old books, there is no sign of improvement.<sup>7</sup>

• The same 1990 study reported 4,595 students per school librarian in California. The national ratio was 900 to 1.<sup>8</sup> In 1998 California had 4,673 students per school librarian.<sup>9</sup>

• California's public libraries are not impressive. According to data published in 1997, California's public libraries had 1.9 volumes per capita. The national average was 2.8. Only three states were worse. California's public libraries circulate 4.9 books per capita, per year. The national average is 6.6. Only 10 states are lower.<sup>10</sup>

• California now ranks in the bottom eight among states in terms of percentage of children between the ages of 5 and 17 who live in poverty.<sup>11</sup>

What's more, print-access variables are strongly correlated with NAEP reading scores. McQuillan reported a correlation of .85 between measures of print access (books and other forms of print available in the home, school, and community) and 1994 NAEP scores.<sup>12</sup> Controlling for poverty, the correlation remained high ( $r=.63$ ).<sup>13</sup> California's problem is not whole language but a lack of reading material.

Independent research supports McQuillan's analysis. There is excellent evidence that children with more ac-

TABLE 1.

**CAP Scores in California, 1984-90**

Grade	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
3	268	274	280	282	282	277	275
6	249	253	260	260	265	262	262
8	250	240	243	247	252	256	257
12	236	241	240	246	250	248	251

Source: Jeff McQuillan, *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims and Real Solutions* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998).

cess to books read more and that children who read more make superior gains in literacy development.

**ACCESS LEADS TO READING**

There is a great deal of evidence showing that children with more access to books read more. Children with more books in the home read more.<sup>14</sup> Barbara Heyns reported that children who live close to public libraries read more than those who live far away.<sup>15</sup> Leslie Morrow and Carol Weinstein found that installing well-designed library corners in kindergartens resulted in more use of books by the

children during intervals of free play.<sup>16</sup> In a study of high school libraries, Rachel Houle and Claude Montmarquette reported that students take more books out of school libraries that have more books and that stay open longer.<sup>17</sup> McQuillan and Julie Au reported that high school students did more reading when their teachers took them to the school library more often on planned library visits.<sup>18</sup>

## READING LEADS TO LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Until recently, it was considered obvious that actual reading helps readers get better and helps them improve their vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and writing. The U.S. government disagrees. The National Reading Panel (NRP) concluded that there is insufficient research to support the hypothesis that reading itself is beneficial and concluded that we should concentrate our efforts on phonemic awareness training, intensive phonics, and having children read aloud so that their errors can be corrected.<sup>19</sup>

The NRP overlooked a tremendous amount of research. The case for recreational reading is overwhelming. It consists of many case histories in which it is clear that reading was the causative factor in helping individuals — such as Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Ben Carson — increase their level of literacy development.<sup>20</sup> It includes studies in which strong and consistent correlations are found between the amount of reading done and gains in reading development.<sup>21</sup> It includes experiments in which readers show modest but reliable gains in vocabulary and spelling knowledge after only one or two exposures to an unfamiliar word in a meaningful context.<sup>22</sup>

The case for recreational reading also includes studies of sustained silent reading. I reviewed the research on sustained silent reading and concluded that it works. In 51 out of 54 comparisons, students who read for pleasure gained as much as or more than comparison students on tests of reading comprehension. In addition, programs that lasted longer were more effective. For programs lasting one academic year or longer, those in sustained silent reading classes outperformed comparison students in eight out of 10 comparisons, and in two other cases there was no difference. The NRP report included only controlled studies of sustained silent reading, included no long-term programs, contained only a dozen comparisons, and misinterpreted and misreported some of the studies that it did include.<sup>23</sup>

In an earlier publication I presented a narrative review of studies that claimed to compare the efficacy of a whole-language approach and a “skills” approach to the teaching of reading. I concluded that, when whole language

was defined correctly — that is, as including a great deal of real reading — students in these classes performed as well as or better than children in skills classes on tests of reading comprehension, were equivalent to children in skills-based classes on tests of “skills” (e.g., reading nonsense words), had more positive attitudes toward reading, and read more on their own.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, the federal government thinks otherwise. The NRP concluded that skills-based methods were superior to whole-language methods ( $d=.31$ ).<sup>25</sup> In my reanalysis, I considered performance on tests of reading comprehension, and I also considered the amount of reading done. I found an overall advantage for whole language ( $d=.17$ ). For the four studies in which it was clear that one group did more real reading, the advantage for the readers was substantial ( $d=.70$ ).<sup>26</sup>

## BETTER LIBRARIES LEAD TO BETTER READING

If more access to books results in more reading and more reading results in more literacy development, it follows that more access to books will result in more literacy development, and research confirms that this is the case. A particularly important aspect of this research deals with the impact of libraries. Research on the impact of libraries over the last decade has shown that better school libraries — those with more books and better staffing — are associated with greater literacy development.

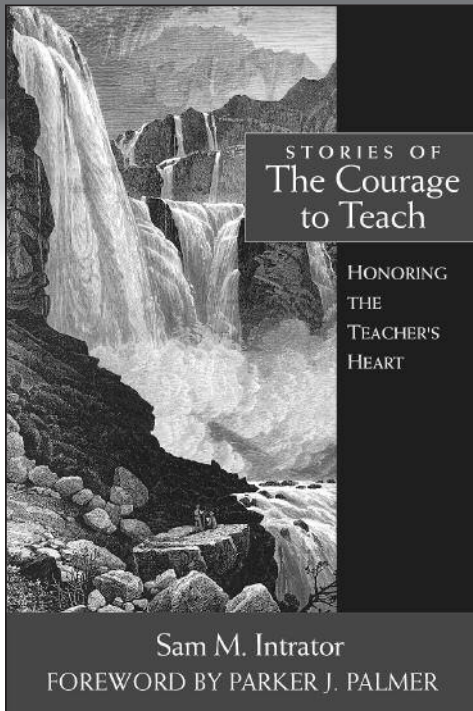
The seminal study in this area was done by Keith Curry Lance and his associates, who found that school libraries in Colorado with better staffing and better collections had higher reading scores, even when factors such as poverty and availability of computers were controlled.<sup>27</sup> These results were confirmed by other studies that showed that states with better school and public libraries earned higher scores on the NAEP fourth-grade reading examination.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Warwick Elley reported a positive association in 32 different countries between the quality of a school’s library and the reading achievement of students.<sup>29</sup> The Colorado results have been replicated in several other states, by Lance himself as well as by other scholars.<sup>30</sup>

## THE ROLE OF PHONICS

The conclusions reached here do not exclude a role for the direct teaching of phonics. Frank Smith has argued that some conscious knowledge of sound/spelling correspondences can help make texts comprehensible. However, there are severe limits on how much phonics can be taught directly: the rules are complex and have numerous ex-

# Passion. Courage. Teaching.

## Tales of *real* teachers inspired by *The Courage to Teach*



"*Stories of the Courage to Teach* powerfully reminds us that this nation's schools and colleges are blessed with many good teachers . . . [and] challenges today's teachers to see themselves not only as school employees, dedicated to serving children, but as leaders in their schools and communities."

—Bob Chase, President, National Education Association

Be inspired by PARKER PALMER

*The Courage to Teach*

*Let Your Life Speak*

*The Active Life*

Available at

[www.amazon.com/education](http://www.amazon.com/education)

**amazon.com**  
and you're done.™

**JOSSEY-BASS**  
A Wiley Imprint

ceptions. Smith argues that most of our knowledge of phonics is the *result* of reading, not the *cause*.<sup>31</sup> Smith's view is nearly identical to the view presented in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, often cited as supporting heavy, early phonics:

Phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular letter-to-sound relationships . . . once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive.<sup>32</sup>

### WHAT DOES A LOW NAEP SCORE MEAN?

Recall that it was California fourth-graders' low scores on the NAEP examination that stimulated the movement toward heavy phonics-based instruction. It is impossible to know for sure if a low score on the NAEP means that a child cannot read or lacks knowledge of important sound/spelling correspondences. In fact, I suspect that a substantial number of children who received low scores on the NAEP exam can read reasonably well. The NAEP reading comprehension examination is not just a test of literacy; it is also a test of literature. A glance at the evaluation

criteria reveals that readers have to be able to interpret passages the way an "educated" person would. It is quite possible to understand a passage perfectly well but have a nonstandard (or very creative) interpretation or way of answering questions.<sup>33</sup>

An example of the scoring criteria for the 1992 NAEP supports this possibility. In a discussion of the "short constructed response" items of the NAEP, a sample passage was presented that dealt with Amanda Clement, the first paid woman umpire in baseball. Fourth-graders were asked, "If she were alive today, what question would you like to ask Mandy about her career? Explain why the answer to your question would be important to know." Here are two answers that were considered "unacceptable":

"How old are you? Can I have a picture of you."

"Did you real like basket ball did you have any friends or fans. Was you ever at any basketball games? The reason I would ask these questions is because I like basket, ball to. Was you ever a cher-leader? What color is your hair because if she ever got lost or anything you or people would have to (know) what color here hair is."

The best answers, according to the authors of the NAEP report, indicated that "the student has considered the more



complex social or personal issues suggested by the passage.”<sup>34</sup> I am not arguing that the unacceptable examples presented here show high levels of literacy achievement. They don’t. But it is clear to me that the writers were not completely illiterate; they have obviously acquired basic sound/spelling correspondences. It should also be noted that 17% of California fourth-graders wrote “unacceptable” answers to this question and 6% did not write anything. This means that 77% wrote answers that were considered to be of higher quality than these two.<sup>35</sup>

## POSTSCRIPT: WHAT HAPPENED AFTER 1992?

What has happened to California’s NAEP scores since 1992? Now that a skills-oriented approach that relies on a heavy dose of phonics is being aggressively pushed by the state government, have NAEP scores risen? Not so far. California’s fourth-graders scored 202 on the NAEP reading exam in 1992; 197 in 1994; and 202 in 1998. (National norms for these years were 215, 212, and 215 respectively).<sup>36</sup>

So the Great Plummet of 1987-92 never happened. California’s reading scores were low well before the California Language Arts Framework Committee met in 1987. Moreover, there is compelling evidence that the low scores are related to California’s impoverished print environment. There is also strong and consistent evidence that the availability of reading material is related to how much children read and that how much children read is related to how well they read. A close look at the evidence suggests that the skills-and-testing hysteria that has gripped California and other states has been unnecessary.

1. Urban Legends Research Centre, [www.ulrc.com.au](http://www.ulrc.com.au).
2. Other urban legends include: Humphrey Bogart was the original Gerber baby in the baby-food ads; the FBI monitors public libraries and notes who is reading “subversive” books; and, my own favorite, if the entire population of China jumped up at the same time, the U.S. would be swamped by a tidal wave. None of these are true.
3. The more recent skill-building approaches to literacy have been labeled “balanced” approaches, balancing reading for meaning and skills. However, Gerald Coles, in *Reading Unmentionables: Damaging Reading Instruction While Seeming to Fix It* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, in press), points out that “a close look reveals that the comprehension end of the seesaw remains close to the ground for a long time.” The approach is essentially skill-building, with some real reading used as a means of practicing skills. For evidence, see *Every Child a Reader* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1995), the state of California’s report of its Reading Task Force, which contains very little mention of real reading but gives birth-to-grave (actually K-8) time lines for phonics instruction and the teaching of other skills.
4. Jeff McQuillan, *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims and Real Solutions* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
6. Howard D. White, “School Library Collections and Services: Ranking

- the States,” *School Library Media Quarterly*, vol. 19, 1990, pp. 13-26.
7. For verification of this claim, readers are invited to visit [www.cde.ca.gov/library/libstats.html](http://www.cde.ca.gov/library/libstats.html).
8. White, op. cit.
9. [www.cde.ca.gov/library/libstats.html](http://www.cde.ca.gov/library/libstats.html)
10. *Digest of Educational Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), Table 422.
11. *Ibid.*, Table 20.
12. McQuillan, p. 77.
13. Poverty has profound effects on literacy development. This is consistent with the claim, discussed below, that access leads to more reading and that more reading leads to better literacy development; children of poverty have far less access to books than more privileged children do (see Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano, “Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities,” *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 36, 2001, pp. 8-26). McQuillan’s finding that literacy development is related to access even when poverty is controlled shows that access itself is an important factor in lack of literacy development.
14. Leslie Morrow, “Home and School Correlates of Early Interest in Literature,” *Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 76, 1983, pp. 221-30; Susan B. Neuman, “The Home Environment and Fifth-Grade Students’ Leisure Reading,” *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 86, 1986, pp. 335-43; and Vincent Greaney and Mary Hagerty, “Correlations of Leisure Time Reading,” *Journal of Research in Reading*, vol. 10, 1987, pp. 3-20.
15. Barbara Heyns, *Summer Reading and the Effects of Schooling* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).
16. Leslie Morrow and Carol Weinstein, “Increasing Children’s Use of Literature Through Program and Physical Changes,” *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 83, 1982, pp. 131-37.
17. Rachel Houle and Claude Montmarquette, “An Empirical Analysis of Loans by School Libraries,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 30, 1984, pp. 104-14.
18. Jeff McQuillan and Julie Au, “The Effect of Print Access on Reading Frequency,” *Reading Psychology*, vol. 22, 2001, pp. 225-48. Of course, simply providing access is not always enough. Sam Pack, in a study of children’s after-school activities, identified a group of children he labeled “library latch-key kids,” children whose parents used the public library from one to six hours a day as a “free source of after-school care.” Pack reported that the children did “little more than ‘hang out’ at the library.” They did not read but passed the entire time socializing with other children and playing on the computer (Sam Pack, “Public Library Use, School Performance, and the Parental X-Factor: A Bio-Documentary Approach to Children’s Snapshots,” *Reading Improvement*, vol. 37, 2000, p. 166). Modest interventions on the part of teachers and librarians, however, can remedy this indifference. Many readers report that one positive experience with reading — a “home run” book experience — was enough to make them dedicated pleasure readers. See Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, 5th ed. (New York: Penguin, 2001). For empirical evidence, see Debra Von Sprecken, Jiyoun Kim, and Stephen Krashen, “The Home Run Book: Can One Positive Reading Experience Create a Reader?,” *California School Library Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2000, pp. 8-9; and Jiyoun Kim and Stephen Krashen, “Another Home Run,” *California English*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2000, p. 25.
- There are many ways to help ensure that home run experiences will happen, among them, conducting read-alouds (Trelease, op. cit.); modeling reading (see, for example, Kevin Wheldall and Judy Entwistle, “Back in the USSR: The Effect of Teacher Modeling of Silent Reading on Pupils’ Reading Behavior in the Primary School Classroom,” *Educational Psychology*, vol. 8, 1988, pp. 51-56); holding interesting book discussions; and just providing time to read. There is consistent evidence showing that, when students are provided time to read, they will take advantage of it. When observations of sustained silent reading classes are made in the middle of the school year and when students have adequate access to interesting reading material, the vast majority of students are involved in reading during the designated time (see Debra Von Sprecken and Stephen Krashen, “Do Students Read During Sustained Silent Reading?,” *California Reader*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1998, pp. 11-13; Kera Cohen, “Reluctant Eighth-Grade Readers Enjoy Sustained Silent Reading,” *California Reader*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1999, pp. 22-25; and Rene Herda and Francisco Ramos, “How Consistently Do Students Read During

Sustained Silent Reading?," *California School Library Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, pp. 29-31).

19. *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*, available at [www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.htm](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/report.htm).

20. These cases are reviewed in Stephen Krashen, *The Power of Reading* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1993).

21. Stephen Krashen, "Do We Learn to Read by Reading? The Relationship Between Free Reading and Reading Ability," in Deborah Tannen, ed., *Linguistics in Context: Connecting Observation and Understanding* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1988), pp. 269-98.

22. These experiments are reviewed in Krashen, *The Power of Reading*, chap. 1.

23. Stephen Krashen, "More Smoke and Mirrors: A Critique of the National Reading Panel Report on Fluency," *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2001, pp. 119-23.

24. Stephen Krashen, *Three Arguments Against Whole Language and Why They Are Wrong* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1999).

25. *Report of the National Reading Panel*.

26. Stephen Krashen, "The National Reading Panel Comparison of Whole Language and Phonics: Ignoring the Crucial Variable in Reading," *Talking Points*, in press.

27. Keith Curry Lance, Lynda Welborn, and Christine Hamilton-Pennell, *The Impact of School Library Media Centers on Academic Achievement* (San Jose, Calif.: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 1993).

28. Stephen Krashen, "School Libraries, Public Libraries, and the NAEP Reading Scores," *School Library Media Quarterly*, vol. 23, 1995, pp. 235-38; and McQuillan, op. cit.

29. Warwick Elley, *How in the World Do Children Read?* (Hamburg: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1992).

30. Replication studies by Lance and his colleagues include a second Colorado study (Keith Curry Lance, Marcia Rodney, and Christine Hamilton-Pennell, *How School Librarians Help Kids Achieve Standards: The Second Colorado Study* [San Jose, Calif.: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 2000]); and replications in Alaska (Keith Curry Lance et al., *Information Empowered: The School Librarian as an Agent of Academic Achievement in Alaska Schools* [Juneau: Alaska State Library, 1999]), Oregon (Keith Curry Lance, Marcia Rodney, and Christine Hamilton-Pennell, *Good Schools Have Good Librarians* [Terrebonne: Oregon Educational Media Association, 2001]), and Pennsylvania (Keith Curry Lance et al., *Measuring to Standards: The Impact of School Library Programs and Information Literacy in Pennsylvania Schools* [Greensburg: Pennsylvania Citizens for Better Libraries, 2000]). Similar studies have been done in Texas (Ester Smith, *Texas School Libraries: Standards, Resources, Services, and Students' Performance*, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 2001, available at [www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/pubs/schlibsurvey/index.html](http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/pubs/schlibsurvey/index.html)); Massachusetts (James Baughman, *School Libraries and MCAS Scores*, 2000, available at <http://web.simmons.edu/~baughman/mcas-school-libraries/>); and Indiana (*A Study of the Differences Between Higher- and Lower-Performing Indiana Schools in Reading and Mathematics* [Oak Brook, Ill.: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000]).

In all these studies, poverty was a predictor of achievement. The number of books per student and the level of library staffing were also consistent predictors of achievement. In most studies, these relationships held even when poverty was controlled (the Colorado replication and the Oregon, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Texas studies); in the Alaska and Pennsylvania studies, only staffing predicted reading scores, and in the Alaska study this was the case only when poverty was not controlled. The Colorado replication and the Pennsylvania, Texas, and Oregon studies used tests of reading comprehension only. In Alaska and Indiana, math was included, and in Massachusetts, the measure

included language arts, math, and science.

31. Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1994).

32. Richard Anderson et al., *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1985), p. 38.

33. Judith Langer et al., *Reading Assessment Redesigned: Authentic Texts and Innovative Instruments in NAEP's 1992 Survey* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Report No. 23-FR-07, 1995), p. 74.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Patricia Donahue et al., *NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card for the States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Meanwhile, SAT 9 (Stanford Achievement Test) scores have increased in California since 1998. Does the increased emphasis on phonics deserve the credit? Recall that NAEP scores up to 1998 reveal no increases for fourth-graders in California and that there have been no NAEP results analyzed for individual states since that time. One could argue that the impact of phonics became apparent only after 1998, because it took time for changes to be made. The new approaches to reading were announced only in 1995 (see *Every Child a Reader* [Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1995]).

It is premature to grant credit for SAT 9 increases to intensive phonics instruction, however. There are other plausible reasons for the gains. The SAT 9 was introduced in California in 1998. Research has shown that, after new tests are introduced, test scores rise, which is why commercial tests need to be recalibrated every few years (see Robert Linn, Elizabeth Graue, and Nancy Sanders, "Comparing State and District Test Results to National Norms: The Validity of Claims That 'Everyone Is Above Average,'" *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, vol. 10, 1990, pp. 5-14). Typical test score inflation is about 1.5 to 2 points per year, which accounts for a great deal of the gain seen in California. "Test inflation" is especially prevalent in California where the same test has now been given for four years in a row, punishments for lower scores are severe, and rewards for higher scores are generous. This pressure has resulted in districts' using unusual and extraordinary means for raising test scores, some of which have nothing to do with increased competence.

Among the bogus means of increasing test scores are extensive training in certain test-taking skills and selective testing — that is, excluding low-scoring children from the tested group. *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Nanette Asimov reported that selective testing may have occurred in California (Nanette Asimov, "Test Scores Up, Test-Takers Down: Link Between Participation, Improvement on School Exam Promotes Concern," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 July 2000). Asimov reported that in many cases in which SAT 9 scores increased from year to year, the number of students tested decreased. According to Asimov, "questionable pairings" appeared in 22 San Francisco area school districts. And of course some test-taking skills will raise scores without an increase in competence. If there is no penalty for guessing, for example, simply encouraging guessing will raise scores. Using these means to raise scores is like claiming to raise the temperature of the room by lighting a match under the thermometer.

No study has been conducted of teaching practices before and after the new phonics emphasis, and no attempt has been made to search for a specific link between increased phonics teaching and improvement in test scores. A detailed look at experimental research comparing intensive versus "regular" phonics teaching shows that the phonics advantage is limited only to phonetically regular words presented in isolation — with only a weak impact on tests of reading comprehension for older children (grades 2-6). SAT 9 tests are given only to grades 2 and higher (see Elaine M. Garan, "Beyond the Smoke and Mirrors: A Critique of the National Reading Panel Report on Phonics," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2001, pp. 500-506). ■



"My dog ate the kid who was helping me with my homework!"