

Reading First versus Common Core -- What is the difference? Which one is best? What are the results? Oh, it can all be so confusing! Here is an attempt to define and clarify the approach and results of each program:

READING FIRST STATE STANDARDS:

In 1997 Congress asked the Director of NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development), in consultation with the Secretary of Education, to convene a National Reading Panel to assess the effectiveness of various approaches to teach children to read. This research was conducted by experts at major universities nationwide, and included brain imaging studies.

Test items were developed or contracted for by state departments of education and reviewed by a state's teachers, consultants, and public agencies through a public process before and after tests were given. The process for determining passing scores was controlled by state departments of education with parents and state legislators participating by means of an open vote.

The results clearly documented that children who learn to read through a systematic, sequential, and explicit phonics-based approach made much more progress than children who learn to read without such instruction. This included students with disabilities and English language learners. These findings were the basis for the 2000 report *Teaching Children to Read,* and used to craft *Reading First.*

Prior to *Reading First* school districts could spend federal education funds pretty much as they pleased. *Reading First* broke new ground by limiting a school's selection of texts to those based on scientifically-based reading research instruction.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS:

In 2010 the Common Core State Standards Initiative was formed, designed to provide teachers and parents with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn. These standards were developed by private limited public discussion of the final draft. There is no mention of scientifically-based teaching methods.

Test items were controlled by state departments of education and the test consortia. There was no participation in a vote by parents and state legislators, and there was no public release of most test items after use. It was unclear how passing test scores will be determined or if there would be state-specific scores.

Schools and teachers decide how best to help students reach the standards by having them try to read and comprehend more complex texts that are introduced much earlier than before, and participate in collaborative

conversations about what they read.

For example, *Frog and Toad* was read in 2nd or 3rd grade under past standards. Under the English Language Arts Common Core Standards this text is expected to be read at the kindergarten and 1st grade level, and students are expected to collaborate and analyze the material in the story.

With the Common Core in mind, the 650,000 student Los Angeles Unified School District began purchasing iPads with embedded Pearson-produced curriculum already installed. (Ed. Week, April 29, 2014) The Pearson curriculum does not include direct, explicit phonics.

For example, the *Learn to Read with Tug the Pup* series feature *important Common Core State Standards connections, including sight word vocabulary, simple texts, and strong picture support.*

Results? Minnesota's first Common-Core aligned tests showed a sharp decrease in reading scores.

And in *The Washington Post* Valerie Straus revealed New York's experience: *The Common Core tests are so difficult few can demonstrate their learning. New York is the canary in the Common Core mine. Is the Common Core and its tests the path to college readiness? We think not.*

CONCLUSION:

It is clear to me that the Common Core guidelines should also include a good phonics reading program that teaches the skills, nuts, and bolts of English, so that students are able to read and comprehend these complex texts.

How on earth can students be expected to read complex texts without first teaching them HOW to read? Scientifically based reading instruction is not a conflict of interest, It should be the very essence of any good reading program.

For example, Lowell School District in Whittier, CA implemented *Phonics Pathways* with all of their Title 1 students, and at midyear comprehension scores for third grade went up an average of 26 national percentage points, fourth grade 17 points, fifth grade 8 points, and sixth grade 22 national percentile points. Their reading specialist Bettina Dunne wrote:

Phonics Pathways is an invaluable aid to teaching phonics. It requires little or no preparation time and is appropriate for all grade levels. Phonics Pathways does not teach comprehension, but it unlocks the secrets of sound/symbol relationships allowing comprehension to become the focus. Students, now able to read words, can meet reading at its most vital level — they can read for meaning.

There -- enough said!

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