

Reading Legislation: An Alarming Development

W. Dorsey Hammond, Ph.D.

Intended for parents, teachers, members of boards of education, legislators, and other interested citizens.

Before reading what follows, spend just a couple of minutes reading the following words:

toe	hoe	shoe	ear	dear	hear	bear	maid	paid	said
on	one	only	love	of	off		love	move	cove
I	eye	aye	blue	shoe	new	through	do	too	

These words are easy for us to read, but then we are already readers. To a young child learning to read even these short and simple words, the task is much more challenging. First, the same letters can represent different sounds as in *toe* and *shoe*, or *gone*, *done* and *bone*. And secondly, the same sound can be represented by different letters as in *blue*, *shoe*, *new*, *through*, *do*, and *too*.

There is nothing profound about pointing this out. We just need to remind ourselves of this when we think about teaching children to read. Learning to recognize words involves more than sounding out words letter by letter.

As readers mature, they encounter complex words of multiple syllables, which makes the task even more challenging. In a landmark study published more than sixty years ago, Clymer (1963) demonstrated the limited utility of teaching many of the common generalizations and rules about phonics. Those same conditions exist today. **Phonics, though important, gets us only so far!** Despite claims by some, young readers need more. What other sources of help can a reader draw upon? The reader can draw from the context of the topic or situation. The reader can draw upon existing knowledge and experience and what makes sense. And the reader can draw upon what sounds right to them based on their oral language knowledge. All of these important resources or cues serve to facilitate the learning to read process. To the casual observer or someone who has not carefully studied the reading process, it may appear that when we read, we are merely looking at words and pronouncing them, but much more is occurring beneath the surface.

Thousands of words require a reader to draw upon information beyond phonics. When encountering even the common word *said*, phonics-savvy youngsters would most likely decode it as /*sayed*/, but if they are thinking beyond pronunciation, they would quickly realize that doesn't sound right nor make sense, as in the sentence "I want to go too," *said* Sam. If children are being attentive to language and meaning, they realize that phonics has its limits. Effective teachers realize this as well.

Consequently, it is with alarm we learn that ten states, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Ohio have outlawed cueing systems in the instruction of reading. In the state of Ohio for example, the three cueing systems were banned in House Bill (HB) 33 in the fall of 2023 as part of the budget bill. In all of these states, legislators, state bureaucrats, and governors have gotten some very bad and damaging advice.

Before pursuing the specific issue of cueing systems, one must raise the issue of whether a state government or political entity should mandate or ban certain instructional practices. This is a slippery slope and should be approached very carefully in a democratic society.

There is some confusion about what constitutes the three cueing systems of reading. Briefly, the three cueing systems are:

- the visual/phonics cue: Does it look right? Do the letters match the word the child says?
- The language cue: Does it sound right? Does the child say a word that is consistent with the syntax (word order) and grammar of the language?
- The meaning cue: Does it make sense? Does the child produce a word that aligns with what the text is about?

From the child's perspective, when attempting to recognize a previously unknown word, they ask themselves with some possible variation:

- Does this word I just read look like the word in the text?
- Does it sound right to me?
- Does it make sense?

In the Ohio case, one wonders whether the law banning the three cueing systems unintentionally bans phonics. Phonics is ONE of the cueing systems! Skilled teachers, for many years, have taught their students to use all three of these cues successfully. Less skilled teachers are more likely to simply say, "Sound it out." As we have seen above, many words can't be identified correctly by sounding them out. The three cues are not at all in conflict but are complementary in nature. Young children who are learning to read need all the help they can get to read independently. When they begin to figure out previously unknown words on their own or with minimal teacher support, they feel empowered, which leads to more success.

The use of multiple sources of information makes learning to read an easier task. In addition, it allows young readers to read more text, and as they read more text, they learn more words and they learn more phonics. It is true that children learn words in order to read, but it is also true that more reading of texts leads to the recognition of more words. Stated differently, we learn words in order to read and as we read, we learn more words.

It is a mystery why some commentators of reading reject the obvious contribution that the two cues in addition to phonics contribute to the reading of texts. Perhaps some see the learning to read process as learning individual words in isolation, but this is not how youngsters learn to read. Obviously when dealing with words in isolation, language cues as well as meaning cues can't work. One needs to read actual texts—phrases, connected sentences and paragraphs—for multiple cueing systems to work. Fortunately, there are books and materials specifically designed to allow emerging readers to successfully read connected texts using all three cueing systems. When children read phrases and connected sentences, language and meaning cues make major contributions not only to the recognition of words but also to reading fluency and reading comprehension.

Teaching students to use three cueing systems encourages them to think when they read, so are we really intent on banning children's thinking in classrooms? Do we really want the 2nd grade teacher to be breaking the law when she says to her student after the child has examined a word phonetically in a

sentence with little or no success, “Think about what you are reading. What word might make sense here?” Will the Reading Police show up to arrest her? I jest a bit, but what nonsense have we wrought?

This move to ban children from employing useful cues and activities that contribute to the learning to read process is the work of a subgroup known as “Science of Reading.” The group is amorphous in nature, made up of some scientists and those who engage in reading research, non-scientists, commentators, bloggers, a few educators, etc. Though the group does not speak with one voice, the general theme is one of *phonics first/phonics only* in beginning reading instruction.

Parents, teachers, policy makers, and other citizens interested in our schools should be aware of several truths.

1. The Science of Reading (SoR) movement as currently defined fails to include much good science about the reading process and how children learn. SoR advocates cherry pick the science that fits their agenda but ignore or attempt to dismiss contradictory science.
2. The curriculum espoused by the SoR advocates, essentially a *phonics first* pedagogy, has been in place in many schools and mandated by most states for at least 15 years. Yet scores on fourth and fifth grade reading achievement tests have not improved. In some cases, overall reading scores have flatlined, and in a few cases scores have declined. Instead of recognizing these facts and modifying their ideology, followers of SoR continue to double down by advocating not only *phonics first* but *phonics only* for beginning reading.
3. Experienced and skilled teachers encourage students to use multiple cues when they are reading, including phonics but not excluding the other important sources of information. One example among many is the highly successful intervention program *Reading Recovery*, which is used extensively with young children at risk in English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, and the U.S. Some in the SoR community have tried unsuccessfully to discredit *Reading Recovery* because it doesn't fit their model of what they think reading is.
4. As adult readers, we use multiple systems when we read. Of course we are very skilled in recognizing words, but our knowledge and use of language as well as our disposition to make sense results in the reading process being more successful and efficient. We often anticipate words and phrases in text as we read for meaning. Even our word processor does this these days when we are keyboarding. We monitor for meaning and are acutely aware when something we are reading just doesn't sound right or doesn't make sense. This skill of using phonics as well as language and meaning allows us to read efficiently when we read silently and to read fluently and with appropriate expression when we read aloud.
5. This controversy is not new to our profession. We have been in this position before with the call for an exclusive focus on phonics. After the publication of the book, *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955), there was a strong push for more intensive phonics instruction. The push soon wore itself out when reading achievement didn't improve. Jeanne Chall's book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967) called for more phonics instruction as well. Schools and publishers of teaching materials responded, but again the emphasis was short lived when educators and researchers discovered that the real issue for most readers was comprehension, not phonics. Now here we are again again with a call for more phonics instruction. This time the trend is lasting longer because government funding is behind the push, i.e., *if you don't do what*

we say you don't get the funding. This, too, will pass in the coming years. In the meantime, young students will suffer.

6. Many reading scholars are not in agreement with what the SoR group is advocating. Some noted scholars have opposed the SoR agenda from the beginning. More recently, scholarly articles are beginning to appear in juried research journals and on other highly credible platforms questioning and disproving the theoretical foundation of SoR.
7. To the best knowledge of this author, there are no controlled, long-term studies that can report increased reading comprehension in the intermediate grades and beyond because of the curriculum espoused by SoR. In other words, where is the evidence? In spite of ten or more years of a SoR curriculum implemented in many classrooms or districts, the SoR advocates have failed to produce evidence of increased reading achievement. And to suggest that the use of other information sources such as meaning and language cues, in addition to phonics, is somehow detrimental to learning to read is preposterous.

This is not to question the role phonics plays in the learning to read process. Phonics plays an important role in learning to read for most children, and some teachers have not taught phonics enough or effectively enough, but the issue is much more complex. More than twenty years ago in a published monograph, this author stated that the issue was not phonics or no phonics, but rather *what kind* of phonics, *how much* phonics and *when* should phonics be taught. (Hammond, 1999). These three questions are still very relevant today.

Why the impassioned defense of the three cueing systems? There are two reasons. First, cueing-systems instruction when used appropriately works very effectively when young readers or struggling readers are learning to read. Second, as stated earlier, reading is a language and thinking process as well as a visual process of looking at letter combinations. The three cues are complementary and interactive and reflect the essence of what we do when we read. No amount of science or pseudo-science can dispel this fact.

What has led to recent legislation and mandates to embrace SoR in its present form and to ban cueing systems? SoR advocates, despite massive campaigning, have not been able to convince most teachers that embracing SoR ideology and abandoning cueing systems in reading is effective. Consequently, we see the present move to mandates and legislation.

Finally, what will be the consequences of a legislative banning of the three cueing systems? The most likely outcome is that nothing will happen. Good teachers will continue to use multiple sources of information when appropriate, unless teachers are closely monitored not to do so. Any monitoring system will be unnecessarily expensive. If this occurs, however, some teachers will simply defy the ban. No school administrator will want to make trouble for those teachers who are doing an excellent job in their classroom. Other veteran teachers will choose to transfer to an upper grade level where the issue is less volatile, thus leaving the early grade instruction in reading to new and less experienced teachers. A few teachers will retire early because they don't want to deal with the nonsense. (This author knows of two outstanding teachers who recently retired early rather than deal with unreasonable mandates in reading.) In Ohio, as the law is written, the three cueing systems may be used if recommended in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Consequently, informed reading teachers will make sure as many students as possible get IEPs in order for cueing systems to become part of the instruction. This too will be expensive. In addition, it is likely that some inventive teachers will modify their instructional language just enough to invoke multiple cueing systems without appearing to do so. As a result of banning cueing

system instruction, we can also predict that there will be a significant increase in children being labelled as dyslexic. After all, if the teacher is following a so-called evidenced/research based instructional program and the child doesn't learn to read, it must be something inherent in the child that is causing the problem. None of this bodes well in the coming years for teaching children to read.

Any banning or attempt to ban cueing systems in the learning to read process is a threat to children who are attempting to learn to read. These egregious political actions should be banned, not the three cueing systems.

References

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Note: Dorsey Hammond began his career as a fourth grade teacher. During his doctoral studies, he was a research analyst for a major grant on first grade reading, which involved frequent, close observation of beginning reading instruction. As a university professor for forty years, he worked with early grade teachers in their classrooms regularly and frequently, observing their instruction and the responses of their students.