

Voices of Carolina: Phonics program teaches all ages to read

By Ashley Landess

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Two veteran public school teachers, Monica Beebe and Claudia Cordray, visited us in our office recently, and what they told us was shocking. There are ninth-graders on the college prep track who cannot write in cursive. There are adults who cannot pass reading tests required to secure employment.

These children -- and the adults they become -- are products of South Carolina's public schools. Furthermore, Cordray and Beebe believe our teachers are not being properly prepared to instruct reading and writing. They said most of these teachers have never been taught the 29 rules of English, which are the foundation for how our language works.

National reports suggest many American children are reading at a below-average level. It would appear from the PACT scores that many South Carolina children are having a hard time with our language as well. By the eighth grade, 30 percent of students scored below basic on the English/language arts section of the PACT test.

National studies at the National Institute of Child Health and Development show there is a simple solution to the reading problem. Following the results of this research, Cordray and Beebe have developed a program they call STEPS that teaches children to read, write and comprehend our language by the third grade and even earlier.

It is based on explicit phonics, and there is nothing new about it. It is the way children used to be taught to read, write and comprehend English decades ago. National experts are coming around to the benefits of this type of program -- so much so that the No Child Left Behind Act mandates that states teach it or lose access to certain federal money.

Cordray and Beebe have put together a comprehensive class with materials -- which they have paid for with their own money -- that will enable teachers to learn and teach this program within the same school year. That means we can catch kids and teachers up right now.

These dedicated teachers have already taught STEPS to several hundred teachers in different schools, with exciting results. An elementary class in Barnwell was made up of 14 students who failed to score "Ready" for first grade. These first graders were using STEPS during the 2001-02 school year.

On a spelling skills test taken in August, the average score was less than one word spelled

correctly per student -- that's deemed kindergarten level. By April of the school year, the class average had increased to scoring at a second-grade level.

At Oakbrook Elementary School in Summerville, second-grade scores improved dramatically after STEPS was implemented -- from 71 percent above average to 96 percent in reading comprehension.

There are other success stories. One of the teachers talks about using STEPS to help adults in her English as a Second Language classes. A man in his 30s is thankful he can get a better job after STEPS helped him improve his reading skills. The students of a first-year teacher outscored the students of veteran teachers because that new teacher used STEPS.

Why aren't we teaching explicit phonics? Cordray and Beebe tell depressing stories about the negative response to genuine education reform. Teachers are punished for trying STEPS, even when the scores prove it works. Others hide the program from disapproving education bureaucrats. Some principals are supportive and even encouraging, but they are quietly so.

Money is specifically available through No Child Left Behind to train all elementary school teachers in South Carolina in explicit phonics. The program could be introduced in the colleges for no cost. All the early childhood programs in the state will do nothing to help our children if they can't read. This program works. Education leaders and policy makers need to give it a chance. If they don't, we are going to certainly lose federal dollars for our schools.

That's the least of it. Without decisive action, we run the risk of sacrificing more children on the altar of the status quo, thus creating a generation that is unprepared to function in an increasingly competitive job market. That is the worst of it.