

The Knowledge Connection

By E.D. Hirsch Jr.

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Why has the No Child Left Behind law left so many children behind? According to the latest scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the reading achievement of eighth-graders has declined since the law was passed in 2001, and the large reading gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children -- "the achievement gap" -- has stayed where it was. Today's eighth-graders had recorded gains in fourth grade, but these have not led to improvements in later grades -- when reading scores actually count for a student's future.

Those in Congress in charge of crafting revisions should understand that the law's disappointing results owe less to defects in the law than to the methods and ideas schools use in their attempts to fulfill the "adequate yearly progress" mandate for all groups of students; this causes schools, as many complain, to teach to reading tests rather than educate children. But intensive test preparation by schools has resulted in lower reading test scores in later grades. "Teaching to the test" does not effectively teach to the test after all.

Studies of reading comprehension show that knowing something of the topic you're reading about is the most important variable in comprehension. After a child learns to sound out words, comprehension is mostly knowledge. Many technical studies support the assertion that after students can fluently sound out words, relevant knowledge is the crucial difference between students who are good or poor readers. In light of the relevant science, an analysis of the textbooks and methods used to teach reading and language arts -- for three hours a day in many places -- indicates some of the reasons for the disappointing later results. These test-prep materials are constructed on the mistaken view that reading comprehension is a skill that can be perfected by practice, as typing can be. This how-to conception of reading has caused schools to spend a lot of unproductive time on trivial content and on drills such as "finding the main idea" and less time on history, science and the arts.

That educators hold this view of reading comprehension is not entirely their fault. They have depended on the authoritative Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP), published in 2000, which, for all its good advice on teaching students how to turn written symbols into the sounds of language, is highly incomplete on the subject of reading comprehension -- the skill that is mainly measured in later grades and the ability that our older students chiefly lack. Important scientific studies of comprehension showing the paramount importance of relevant knowledge are not to be found in the text or bibliographies of the NRP report.

Fatefully, the National Reading Panel did not include enough top specialists in language comprehension. The panel urgently needs to be reconvened to repair that omission so a revised report can be issued explaining that if we want students to score well on reading tests in the eighth grade and not just in the fourth grade, we need to teach them the broad knowledge that is taken for granted in books and lectures. A revised and improved NRP report would also emphasize that a knowledge-based strategy must be long-range -- starting as early as kindergarten to focus on substantial content read aloud to students and discussed.

Language comprehension is a slow-growing plant. Even with a coherent curriculum, the buildup of knowledge and vocabulary is a gradual, multiyear process that occurs at an almost imperceptible rate. The results show up later.

Consider the eighth-grade NAEP results from Massachusetts, which are a stunning exception to the nationwide pattern of stagnation and decline. Since 1998, the state has improved significantly in the number of eighth-graders reading at the "proficient" or "advanced" levels: Massachusetts now has the largest percentage of students reading at that higher level, and it is No. 1 in average scores for the eighth grade. That is because Massachusetts decided in 1997 that students (and teachers) should learn certain explicit, substantive things about history, science and literature, and that students should be tested on such knowledge.

The sure road to adequate progress in reading is adequate progress in knowledge. Congress and the states should note that the best tests to "teach to" are subject-matter tests based on explicit content standards for each grade. Massachusetts's results confirm that this is the best way to measure and to achieve real progress in reading. The revisers of No Child Left Behind, and all who are connected with our schools, need to be cognizant of -- and do something about -- the critical knowledge connection.

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