

THE UNIQUE POWER OF READING AND HOW TO UNLEASH IT

“**R**EADING IS the most complex of human functions,” Sally E. Shaywitz of Yale Medical School recently observed, and in this issue of *American Educator* we explore some of that complexity. We do so against a promising backdrop of policy developments across the country. From the very Office of the President of the United States, and resounding through numerous states and school districts, the goal of having every child able to read with competence and confidence has become a national priority. This recognition of the centrality of the issue—and of the obstacles we face—is unparalleled in the history of the country and represents a display of political will that offers us a tremendous opportunity.

However, political will, as necessary as it is, is not sufficient. It must be joined by an unyielding commitment to base literacy instruction on the large body of research available to us. And here again there are promising developments. Just this spring, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences completed a review and synthesis of reading research and issued a report that sets forth the components needed to ensure that children become successful readers. The elements of effective reading instruction are not a matter of opinion or ideology; like good medical practice, reading instruction can rest on a secure scientific base, says the NRC report.

There was more action on the policy front when, very recently, a broad range of national education organizations, acting together as the Learning First Alliance, finished their work on an “action plan” entitled “Every Child Reading.” [See p. 52-63 of this issue.] Again, there is broad consensus on the major elements of effective literacy instruction:

- All children need explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and exposure to rich literature, both fiction and non-fiction.
- While children need instruction in phonics in early reading development, even then, attention to meaning, comprehension strategies, language development, and writing are essential.
- At all times, developing children’s interest and pleasure in reading must be as much a focus as developing their reading skills.”

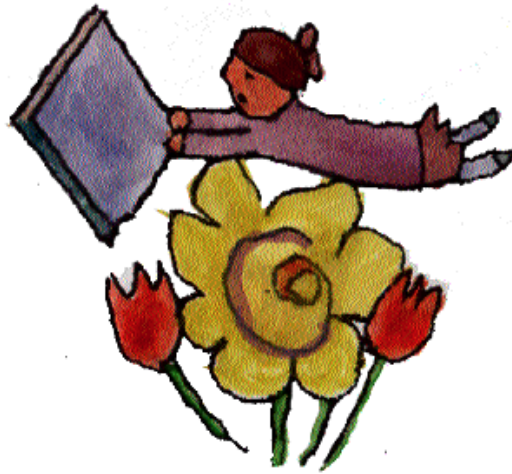
The debate over whether reading is acquired “naturally,” more or less like learning to speak, is over; read-

ing requires explicit instruction. The debate over what role skilled decoding plays in reading comprehension is over; we know it is central. The debate over whether decoding should be taught systematically or incidentally is over; why leave anything to chance when we can give children an organized, thorough, and efficient grounding in the sound-to-symbol architecture of written language. And for almost everyone, there never was, or never should have been, any debate about the need to immerse children in good literature, attend to meaning right from the start, integrate writing at every stage, and involve students in a wide array of engaging print activities.

AS THE political will to see that every child becomes a successful reader converges with a solid research base to guide our efforts, we are witnessing the confluence of two powerful forces. But we are not yet home free. As Marilyn Jager Adams, the renowned reading researcher, recently wrote, “...the extent to which these policy initiatives will have an actual impact on classroom instruction is a separate issue—and it is only changes in the classroom that really matter.”

She is right, of course. The political will and policy consensus are tremendously important. The progress that has been made on these fronts in a relatively short time is nothing short of phenomenal. We have come a long way from where we were just a few years ago. But we are not yet where we need to be. I was re-





mindful of this recently when I read an article about a special education teacher whose own son was having serious problems learning to read. The methods the school district was using to help her son were not working. Never having been exposed to the current reading research herself, it took this teacher/mother two years to wade through the literature and finally track down the kind of work reported on in this issue. Her son learned to read, but the two lost years were critical ones in his development.

This must never happen again. We must find ways to ensure that research based on scientific principles reaches those on the front lines of education. Teachers must be trained in the best research, they must have abundant opportunity to witness and be supported in good practice, and they must have at their disposal research-based instructional materials that they can use with confidence and success.

It was with that need in mind that we planned this issue of *American Educator*. On a series of key topics, we have attempted to bridge the gap between research and practice. What, for example, is this elusive element, the phoneme? Why has the lack of phonemic awareness blocked the doorway to reading for so many children, and how can we remedy that situation? And how can we identify and help those children who seem headed for trouble in reading *before* they fall behind? And here's a pivotal question: We know that skilled decoding is central to success in reading, but this renewed attention to decoding won't amount to much unless it is taught well, which it now typically is not. How can we avoid not only the problems found in whole-language programs but also the confusion and inefficiency that mars most traditional phonics programs? And, moving ahead a few years, what do we do about the all-too-familiar problem that plagues middle school and beyond: students' eyes glazing over as they face yet another impenetrable page of social studies text. How can we get them to dig in and pull real meaning from that text? And how can we help—actually, *save* is not too strong a word here—the ninth-grade student who is reading at a third-grade level? Finally, we offer a proven, homemade idea for getting books, books, and more books into the hands and homes of our students.

Some of these articles take up complex issues. We do not shy away from that complexity. Successfully

ushering children into a sophisticated, literate society like ours, teaching them to deal with all kinds of text, and finding the motivational levers that will turn them into avid readers are jobs for experts. These articles offer a glimpse of the large body of knowledge and skills that must be mastered. In acknowledging the complexity of the teaching task, we pay homage to those who carry it out.

SPREAD THROUGHOUT this issue you will find images that express, better than we can in words, why we care so passionately about securing the everyday details of teaching reading. Here you will see reading's extraordinary power: the mesmerizing, lost-in-a-book magic of reading; the joys of shared reading; the poignancy of intergenerational reading; the avid reader, reading in every odd place, grabbing every opportunity; the solitary scholar; the community of readers; reading over the ages, across time and history and cultures; reading as consolation for old age and as an antidote for boredom and hard labor; reading as the centerpiece of education and the key that unlocks humanity's storehouse of recorded knowledge; reading in confinement, helping the spirit stay alive though the body be imprisoned.

Beginning and ending this issue of *American Educator* are two overarching articles, "What Reading Does for the Mind" and "What Reading Does for the Soul." I'll leave Annie Dillard for your enjoyment, but I would like to say a few words about the first article, which describes the profound cognitive effects that reading has. Reading is a complex undertaking that requires a lot from the reader; but, like good art, its demands are more than matched by what it gives in return. Each time a person reads, he not only takes in the particular passage that confronts him, he also builds his cognitive abilities in a number of ways. I'll leave the details of how this process unfolds to the authors. Suffice it to say, they bring us very good news: Reading has cascading consequences for the mind; importantly, this reading dynamic is democratic in character. Everyone without serious intellectual impairment can learn to read, and everyone who then exercises that ability will be a beneficiary of reading's unique power.

We can unleash that power. We know how. We must not let up until the job is done.

—Editor