

This is the cover letter to a letter by 40 of the world's top linguists and psycholinguists to the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, in response to a draft of the Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, to be used in the public schools of Massachusetts. The letter was dated July 14, 1995.

Dear Dr. Antonucci:

We are writing in the hope that the Commonwealth will make the most of an opportunity provided by Education Reform to put our state on a positive track in the area of primary-school reading instruction.

We enclose a letter signed by forty experts on language and on reading—all of whom are Massachusetts residents (and many of whom are parents). This letter concerns the current draft of the Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts ("Constructing and Conveying Meaning"), which proposes standards for reading, writing and literature instruction. The signers include linguists and cognitive psychologists from seven Massachusetts institutions. Among the signers are three members of the National Academy of Sciences, four presidents of the Linguistic Society of America, three directors of major research training programs, and the authors of two of the leading books on language for the general public. The signers of this letter take strong exception to the standards for reading proposed in various sections of this document.

The sort of instruction advocated in the draft Curriculum Framework (often called "Whole Language") has already been adopted as a standard in various other jurisdictions. In many of these jurisdictions (most recently, California), it is widely blamed for serious declines in reading achievement. In the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress, Massachusetts (though highly ranked) was among ten states whose average 1994 scores were singled out as "significantly lower" than its 1992 scores. Fully 33% of Massachusetts public school fourth-graders tested "below basic" in reading, 4% more than in 1992. Given conclusions about reading decline that have been drawn elsewhere, we wonder whether the recent decline in Massachusetts could be connected to the increased use of Whole Language methodology here.

Linguists and psycholinguists believe they can be a productive and cooperative part of some common-sense solutions to this decline. We see no reason why Massachusetts cannot take the lead in reversing nationwide declines in reading. The solutions we would propose are not exotic, but simply follow from the nature of reading and the nature of language. They are also solutions widely advocated by educators involved in the objective study of reading and reading pedagogy. Unfortunately, the standards advocated in the current draft Curriculum Framework point in exactly the wrong direction—*away* from a curriculum that takes linguistic realities into account, and *towards* methods that have failed elsewhere.

We would like to request a meeting with your office at which these issues can be discussed. A number of signers of this letter have indicated their interest in participating in a serious discussion of state standards for reading instruction. Massachusetts has substantial resources in the areas of linguistics (including the two top-rated departments in the country: MIT and UMass/Amherst), psycholinguistics and reading education. These resources could be marshaled in the service of genuine and productive Education Reform.

Here is some background on this issue:

Both empirical research and common sense teach us some elementary facts about reading and reading pedagogy. Written language is a way of notating speech. The basic principles of alphabetic writing systems guarantee that letters and letter groups correspond quite well (even in English) to the fundamental units of spoken language. To become a skilled reader, a learner must master this notational system, learning how the sounds and oral gestures of language correspond to the letters and letter groups. Once this happens, the same system that "constructs meaning" from spoken language will quite naturally "construct meaning" from written language and the learner will be a reader. Learning how to decode the speech sounds notated by the writing system ("phonics") is fundamental to reading.

The standards advocated in the draft Curriculum Framework depart from these views quite considerably. In this, they closely mirror the popular but increasingly criticized approach known as "Whole Language". The essential points of the Massachusetts document are the following.

1. Learning how to decode speech sounds notated by the writing system is not a special key that opens the door to reading.
2. Reading is a way of "constructing meaning" from text. Readers "construct meaning" in many different ways. Using phonics is one of these ways, but it is just one of many "strategies" a reader uses for "constructing meaning" from unfamiliar text. Others are "using context, ... help from peers, and making a guess and going on to decode, understand, and use new words [sic]". Learners need to develop competence in all these strategies.
3. Knowledge of phonics, like knowledge of the other strategies believed essential to reading, should not be taught systematically. This knowledge will emerge in simple response to "print-rich" environments full of "authentic" texts, so long as the child has a helpful teacher who offers some (unsystematic by sympathetic) assistance.

As "Whole Language" advocates themselves have acknowledged, empirical research does not support these claims and recommendations. Skilled readers, it turns out, do not use a multitude of strategies, but examine every letter of every word, and decode the sounds associated with written words. Furthermore, it seems that there is a good correlation between quantity of systematic phonics instruction and ability to read unfamiliar text.

Furthermore, in many jurisdictions where the three points mentioned have already become standards, parents and educators have become alarmed by quite apparent declines in reading levels among students. For example, California recently placed last in a national assessment of elementary-school reading. In response, a state-wide task force is currently charged with re-examining the reading curriculum--i.e. with *moving away* from the standards now being considered for Massachusetts. The Canadian Psychological Association responded to very similar concerns with a 1993 resolution opposing the imposition of these sorts of standards on education in the various provinces.

The Whole Language community typically offers two responses to these criticisms:

- A. They reject controlled (and quantitative) research of all sorts that seems to disfavor the approach. This includes experimental results on reading as well as standard assessments of student performance. Instead, they appeal to unverifiable and subjective reports of classroom experience--so-called "ethnographic" research. This appeal forms an important part of the draft Curriculum Framework as well, which cites exclusively this sort of anecdotal literature, makes no mention of the empirical literature that casts doubt on its recommendations. In fact, two

members of the committee that wrote the draft Curriculum Framework volunteered to us in separate phone conversations the fact that it is "ethnographic" literature on which the drafters of the framework rely for validation of their recommendations. Concerned educators, citizens and parents should find this rejection of verifiable research in favor of unverifiable research alarming.

- B. They appeal to linguistic research in support of the approach. It is alleged in the Curriculum Framework, for example, that the "multiple strategies", "constructing meaning" view of reading is just one consequence of an overall shift in a pattern of research results in the language sciences. The group letter speaks quite directly to this issue. The claim about language and the claim about language research is simply false.

Packaged with the dubious methodology of Whole Language are some marvelous features, which account for its wide popularity among teachers--and which we enthusiastically support. It breaks with the tradition of "Dick and Jane" basal readers in allowing for wide-ranging use of good literature and discussions about books, authors, and literary conventions as early as kindergarten. We are aware of no reason to abandon this aspect of Whole Language. Indeed, a *literature-based curriculum coexisting with systematic instruction in phonics* is exactly the recommendation of Marilyn Jager Adams' famous study of reading instruction.

As Adams notes, "written text has both method and purpose. It is time for us to stop bickering about which is more important". The draft Curriculum framework repudiates method and goes overboard in attention to purpose. There is no reason to insist on a false dichotomy between systematic phonics instruction (method) and good literature (purpose) any more than there is reason to insist on a gap between systematic musical instrument instruction and good music.

We look forward to your response.

Prof. David Pesetsky (MIT)

Dr. Janis Melvold (Mass. Gen. Hosp.)

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From: Forty Massachusetts specialists in linguistics and psycholinguistics

To : Dr. Robert V. Antonucci Commissioner of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Cc: Linda Beardsley, Curriculum Frameworks Coordinator, Dept. of Education Dr. Michael Sentance, Secretary of Education His Excellency, William F. Weld, Governor of Massachusetts Date: July 12, 1995

Subject: Standards for Reading Instruction in Massachusetts

Dear Dr. Antonucci:

We are researchers in linguistics and psycholinguistics—and Massachusetts residents. We are writing to raise certain questions about the inclusion of contentious and, in our view, scientifically unfounded views of language in the sections on reading instruction of the draft Curriculum Content Chapter on Language Arts (“Constructing and Conveying Meaning”), recently circulated by the Massachusetts Department of Education. These views are presented as a principal support for the reading curriculum advocated as an instructional “standard” in this document.

The proposed Content Chapter replaces the common-sense view of reading as the decoding of notated speech with a surprising view of reading as directly “constructing meaning”. According to the document, “constructing meaning” is a process that can be achieved using many “strategies” (guessing, contextual cues, etc.). In this view, the decoding of written words plays a relatively minor role in reading compared to strategies such as contextual guessing. This treats the alphabetic nature of our writing system as little more than an accident, when in fact it is the most important property of written English—a linguistic achievement of historic importance.

The authors of the draft Content Chapter claim that research on language supports their views of reading. The document asserts that research on language has moved from the investigation of particular “components of language—phonological and grammatical units” to the investigation of “its primary function—communication”. These supposed developments in linguistic research are used as arguments for a comparable view of reading. We are entirely unaware of any such shift in research. We want to alert the educational authorities of Massachusetts to the fact that the view of language research presented in this document is inaccurate, and that the claimed consequences for reading instruction should therefore be subjected to serious re-examination. The facts are as follows. Language research continues to focus on the components of language, because this focus reflects the “modular” nature of language itself. Written language is a notation for the structures and units of one of these components. Sound methodology in reading instruction must begin with these realities. Anything else will shortchange those students whom these standards are supposed to help. As linguists, we are concerned that the Commonwealth, through its powers to set standards for schools, should presume to legislate an erroneous view of how human language works, a view that runs counter to most of the major scientific results of more than 100 years of linguistics and psycholinguistics. We are even more concerned that

uninformed thinking about language should lie at the heart of a “standards” document for Massachusetts schools. Respectfully,

[Signers are listed in alphabetical order]

1. **Prof. Emmon Bach** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; President, Linguistic Society of America)
2. **Prof. Andrea Calabrese** (Linguistics, Harvard)
3. **Dr. David Caplan** (Neurology, Massachusetts General Hospital; Director of the Reading Disability Clinic, Massachusetts General Hospital)
4. **Prof. Charles Clifton** (Chair, Dept. of Psychology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
5. **Prof. Mark Feinstein** (Dean of Cognitive Science & Cultural Studies, Hampshire College) 6. **Prof. Kai von Fintel** (Linguistics, MIT)
7. **Prof. Suzanne Flynn** (Foreign Languages and Literatures/Linguistics, MIT)
8. **Prof. John Frampton** (Mathematics, Northeastern University)
9. **Prof. Lyn Frazier** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
10. **Prof. Edward Gibson** (Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT)
11. **Prof. Kenneth Hale** (Linguistics, MIT; former President (1994), Linguistic Society of America; Member, National Academy of Sciences; Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences)
12. **Prof. Morris Halle** (Institute Professor, Linguistics, MIT; former President (1973), Linguistic Society of America; Member, National Academy of Sciences; Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences)
13. **Prof. Irene Heim** (Linguistics, MIT)
14. **Prof. Kyle Johnson** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
15. **Prof. James Harris** (Foreign Languages and Literatures/Linguistics, MIT)
16. **Prof. Ray Jackendoff** (Linguistics/Volen Center for Complex Systems, Brandeis; author, Patterns in the Mind)
17. **Prof. Samuel J. Keyser** (Linguistics, MIT)
18. **Prof. Michael Kenstowicz** (Linguistics, MIT)
19. **Prof. John Kingston** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
20. **Prof. John McCarthy** (Chair, Dept. of Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
21. **Prof. Joan Maling** (Linguistics/Volen Center for Complex Systems, Brandeis)
22. **Prof. Gary Marcus** (Psychology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
23. **Dr. Janis Melvold*** (Neurology, Massachusetts General Hospital)

24. **Prof. Shigeru Miyagawa** (Foreign Languages and Literatures/Linguistics, MIT)
25. **Prof. Mary Catherine O'Connor** (Developmental Studies and Applied Linguistics, Boston University)
26. **Prof. Wayne O'Neil** (Chair, Dept. of Linguistics and Philosophy, MIT)
27. **Prof. Barbara Partee** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; former President (1986), Linguistic Society of America; Member, National Academy of Sciences; Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences)
28. **Prof. David Pesetsky*** (Linguistics, MIT; Co-director, Research Training Program "Language: Acquisition and Computation")
29. **Prof. Steven Pinker** (Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT; Director, McDonnell-Pew Center for Cognitive Neuroscience; author, The Language Instinct)
30. **Prof. Alexander Pollatsek** (Psychology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
31. **Prof. Mary C. Potter** (Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT)
32. **Prof. Janet Randall** (Director, Linguistics Program, Northeastern University)
33. **Prof. Keith Rayner** (Psychology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
34. **Prof. Thomas Roeper** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
35. **Prof. Elisabeth O. Selkirk** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
36. **Prof. Margaret Speas** (Linguistics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst)
37. **Prof. Esther Torrego** (Chair, Dept. of Hispanic Studies, University of Massachusetts at Boston).
38. **Dr. Gloria Waters** (Neuropsychology Lab, Massachusetts General Hospital; School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, McGill University)
39. **Prof. Calvert Watkins** (Linguistics/Classics; Harvard)
40. **Prof. Kenneth Wexler** (Dept. of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT; Co-director, Research Training Program "Language: Acquisition and Computation")

The professors received a response from the Commissioner of Education which they considered to be inadequate and answered with another letter on August 10, 1995 as follows:

Dear Dr. Antonucci:

Thank you for your letter of August 4. We appreciate your attention to our concerns about the curriculum framework "Constructing and Conveying Meaning".

We are, of course, delighted that the next draft of the Curriculum Framework will put more emphasis on the need for a "strong foundation in phonemic decoding". We see this as an obvious step forward. However, we still have some concerns. In particular, a revised document that differs from the draft only in some additional emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness would fail to address the depth and scope of the problems with the draft. If our criticisms and those of our colleagues are taken seriously, the existing draft will have to be thoroughly revised in order to bring it into accord with current knowledge about reading and reading instruction. Specifically, we would like to raise the following questions about the revised draft:

- Will the revised document continue to advocate teaching reading skills only in context, rather than advocating a rational plan of instruction as the basis for the newly emphasized "strong foundation in phonemic decoding"?
- Will the revised document continue to present reading as directly "constructing meaning", rather than as a decoding skill which feeds into a process of meaning construction common to all linguistic communication (including spoken and signed language)? And will it continue to present this view of reading as arising somehow from research in linguistics?
- Will the revised document continue to assert that successful reading involves the use of many "strategies"--of which phonics based decoding is just one? Will the child taught according to the recommendations of the revised document still be encouraged to guess at words that she could be encouraged to sound out instead?
- Will the revised document continue to value anecdotal reports from Whole Language literature more highly than empirical research-based recommendations?

Our personal interest in this issue arose from our dismay as linguists and parents at the misinformation about language and reading that too often guides instructional practice. As a consequence our discussions with colleagues (culminating in the group letter from forty linguists and psycholinguists), Massachusetts now has an opportunity which we hope you will want to take advantage of.

Several of the signers of the group letter are eager to contribute directly to your department's efforts on matters connected to language and reading both now and in the future. In particular, we would be happy to contribute to the process of revision of the Curriculum Framework, rather than wait for a discussion after its completion. Among the signers of the group letter, Prof. Alexander Pollatsek (a specialist in psychology of reading, UMass/Amherst) and several others (including ourselves) have volunteered to work with our office separately or as a group during the process of revisions. Our personal expertise in linguistics and language sciences is also at your disposal, now and in the future, as is the expertise of Massachusetts specialists in reading education such as Dr. Marilyn Jager Adams.

We acknowledge the obvious hard work and sincere efforts of the Curriculum Framework committee. We are also grateful that two members of this committee took the time to discuss the Framework over the telephone. These conversations, however, have given us additional cause to ask whether the particular expertise of the committee members should not be balanced during the process of revision by the expertise of other specialists from around the Commonwealth. This is one reason why several signers of the group letter (including ourselves) ask for a way to participate in the revision process in the manner envisioned by the drafters of Education Reform, who wrote:

"The process for drawing up and revising the frameworks shall be open and consultative, and may include but need not be limited to classroom teachers, parents, faculty of schools of education, and leading college and university figures in both subject matter disciplines and pedagogy." (section 29, subsection 1E)

We, like you, "consider the development of the first-time statewide curriculum frameworks in Massachusetts to be an unprecedented opportunity to bring the vision of the Education Reform Act into classrooms." This is why we hope that your document will be a genuine "reform" document, and not merely a codification of current, often unsatisfactory common practice. We are aware that you have a rather stringent timetable, but we hope that we will be allowed the opportunity to contribute substantively and constructively to the process of revising this document. If the meeting you offer could be arranged at the beginning of September, we would be most grateful.

Finally, we note that your letter was mainly a reply to the cover letter written by the two of us. The forty linguists and psycholinguists who signed the group letter focusing on the framework's unsatisfactory discussion of language will also be grateful for a separate, direct reply to their common concerns. We will be happy to make such a reply available to them.

Thank you once more for your attention.

The letter was signed by Prof. David Pesetsky (Linguistics, MIT) and Dr. Janis Melvold (Dept. of Neurology, Mass. Gen. Hosp.)