

Submitter: Gregg Heacock
Committee: House Committee On Education
Measure: HB 3198
Stance: Neutral

I am a Reading Specialist with over 32 years of classroom experience, mostly teaching disadvantaged students, who had not learned what they should have been taught in the 3rd grade, and, while I support the intentions of this bill, I have serious reservations about its ability to deliver on those intentions.

As someone who moved to Oregon in 2015, where I have actively participated in Oregon's statewide voluntary independent reading program, Oregon Battle of the Books, and have received credentials that allowed me to work as a substitute teacher for the High Desert ESD and should allow me to use my credential as a certified Reading Specialist. My experience last school year as a substitute teacher has made me quite aware of the problem you are trying to address with HB 3198. During that time, I observed teachers telling their students that they were obliged to teach the lesson presented that day to help prepare them to do well on the SBAC being given again that year. Based on the lessons I saw being taught, I understand why last year's test scores were so low.

I am heartened that you are trying to address this problem by training teachers in literacy instruction based on the strands of skills to be developed through what this bill calls "the science of reading and writing." Any success I have had as a teacher comes from having received instruction and coaching from creative professionals training me in the teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, modeling how these might be presented in a way that honored student agency and that were developmentally appropriate. Though I made my share of mistakes, often trying to get students to learn faster than my methods would support, now that I no longer experience the pressure all teachers feel when being held to account, I have been able to research cognitive tools that address the interests and felt needs of students at each stage of educational development.

I have grave reservations about whether this bill will allow individual teachers and districts the independence needed to develop lessons and programs that empower students to ask questions that deepen their learning rather than being given answers that undermine that exploration. On page 7, line 6, I see that the school districts and charter schools receiving funds must ensure that "the literacy assessments, tools, curricula, and digital resources of the inventory are based on research-aligned literacy strategies and are formative, diagnostic, and culturally responsive." To me, this encourages districts and charter schools to purchase materials that claim to offer what this bill demands.

Believing I should know what I am talking about before raising any objections, I downloaded the materials offered by one of the programs receiving a high rating for the ODE, LETRS, offering instructional materials addressing each strand cited in building reading fluency and comprehension. Though it breaks down phonics, I see nothing offered to teachers to help train students to look quickly inside words to recognize letter-patterns that would allow them to read these words quickly enough to gain the fluency required for better comprehension.

Based on the work of Jackie Goldberg, a reading teacher who later became Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, who developed materials to build literacy of adults in the community she served, with other teachers I created sheets for each phonics rule to use with my high school students who lacked such training. I started with the "C-rule," where students were to cross out the "c" if followed by e, i, or y, and write "s" above it, underline each "ch," since they sound different in different words, have leave all others alone, knowing they made the "k" sound. I would put a check mark beside it in pen, which I would change into an "OK" once it was corrected, which would happen as I went around the room. This was followed by the "G-rule," also for words where the sound associated with the letter "g" was determined by whether it was followed by e, i, or y. Of course, there are exceptions, but these exercises were about training students to look inside words to predict how they would sound. Once the "2-vowel rule" and the "Silent E rule" were added to the rest, my students had the grounds needed to understanding rules for inflective endings for verb tenses and possessives.

These materials and the sequence they followed match what this bill calls for. All they lacked was a label saying that they are aligned with "the science of reading."

LETRS, uses the terminology associated with traditional grammar when addressing comprehension. Unfortunately, such terminology stands as a barrier to comprehension, though it may help students answer questions on tests. LETRS presents teachers with objectives for lessons in reading stories or essays but does not provide them with strategies to meet those objectives. I saw nothing about teaching poetry. In short, I found little that dealt with how to promote students' comprehension of text.

Let me share with you an approach to teaching grammar that not only works, but also allows teachers to focus on individual sentences long enough to help students deepen their comprehension. This comes from what I learned from Dr. Constance Amsden, who taught her graduate students a dialogical color-coding process for teaching grammar. (Though one might assume that her approach was "evidence-based," she didn't copyright it to be purchased. She just shared it so others might use it.) Let me share with you how this share worked with 3rd-grade students last school year when I was subbing in La Pine. (I did ask permission from the teacher, before trying this out with his students). Here is the lesson: I wrote "Birds fly" on the board and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a red marker, I wrote, "What word tells what's happening? Underline it with red." (Dr. Amsden would have provided students with strips of colored crepe paper so they could easily correct errors without seeing them as evidence that they had made a mistake.) Then I asked what word they had marked. "Fly" they all answered. "Next, underline the word that tells who or what fly in blue." This they did. Then I had them write another sentence below that, asking them again to underline in red the word that tells what's happening. "Kids played." Then, "Students study." Next, I asked them to look at these sentences and tell me if they notice anything. Many replied that the blue comes before the red. Allowing students agency to discover rules on their own is important. (You can see that I did not do that with teaching phonics rules, but I would do that if I were teaching those rules again. That's what I mean about teachers needing the chance to learn from their mistakes.)

Here is what happened next. (This lesson came from Dorothy Doyle, a reading specialist teaching graduate students how grammar, rhetoric, and logic worked together, shifting from text, to context, to subtext.) I asked students if they knew any birds that don't fly. Hands shot up and voices shouted out all kinds of birds they knew or believed did not fly. Then, I told them that there were statements of fact and statements of opinion. A statement of fact was one that subjected to being proven not true. A statement of opinion was not subject to such questioning, like "Ice cream tastes good." That's a matter of opinion, even if everyone in the room agrees. "So, is the sentence 'Birds fly' a statement of opinion or a statement of fact?" They agreed that it was a statement of fact. "So, is it true or false? Do birds fly?" They shouted out that it was true. "But you just identified some birds that don't fly. Is it still true?" Generally, they stuck with their answer that it was true. "So, what if the sentence said, 'All birds fly.' Would that be true?" "No!" they cried in unison. "Okay, if I said, 'Birds flew,' would that be happening in the present, the past, or the future?" "In the past." "So, does 'Birds fly' means birds are flying right now? Or does it mean something else?" As we talked about it further, they understood that it meant that enough birds have been observed flying in the past that people feel it is acceptable to say, "Birds fly," even though there may be some exceptions. They could see, as Aristotle did that classification, that classification includes potential, which moves us into the 4th-dimension.

Students bring to class their unconscious oral understanding of language. Instruction presents them with situations to respond to so they might reflect on the mystery that contains meaning to develop a conscious understanding of how text works. None of the programs labelling themselves as "the science of reading" seem to take this into account. If you really want to promote the science of reading, you need to focus your attention on teachers themselves and how to provide embedded professional development in an ongoing process that is collegial, rather than bureaucratically driven.

Let me put it to you this way: Grammar is about how words relate to each other. Rhetoric is about how words relate to ideas. Logic is about how ideas relate to ideas. Further, there are words that identify real things, words that identify imaginary things, and words that are used as if they are things (substitution words, and words identifying emotions, feelings, concepts, and beliefs—all where the relevant question is: "What do you really mean by that?"). How does this relate to programs describing themselves as "the science of reading"? It has to do with social reality—the difference between morality and ethics. Once you copyright your approach to teaching and can sell it on the open market, you have the right to make such claims until they are proven to be bogus. Euclid never made such claims about his instructional methods for teaching geometry. Neither did my friend and colleague, Jaime Escalante, make such claims about his instructional approach to teaching calculus, nor did he try to sell it to make a profit, though the film, "Stand and Deliver," might have allowed him to do so. Teachers and educational theorists share their "science of reading and cognition" for free.

So, why are we thinking of passing legislation that would have the State of Oregon purchase materials that companies advertise as being in line with “the science of reading”? Advertising follows the model offered earlier for what words identify. The reality of any product is that it has certain attributes. A company raises these attributes to the imagination, calling them benefits. The promise is that these benefits will transform the user into being someone who is acceptable to others. I am not saying we should never buy products, but we should not put more trust into these profit-seeking companies than we are willing to invest in our own teachers. When teachers make mistakes and own their mistakes, they can learn from them. When teachers are directed to methods and materials purchased by those above them, the mistakes they notice offer no lessons they can use to benefit their students. This is the state we already find ourselves in, one we are trying to correct. I ask you to think before you pass this act. This bill’s intention is honorable. Let the follow-through be honorable as well. Let it honor teachers with the respect they deserve by offering the support that they need to do their jobs well.

Let us focus on collegial professional development. Teachers offered stipends to take professional development classes give them the freedom to question the approaches being taught, possibly stretching the understanding of those who thought they already had all the answers.

While I cannot support the bill as it now stands, I choose to remain neutral, hoping that you will respond positively to those objections and reservations others, besides me, have offered. I hope that legislation will be passed this session that addresses the problem we all want to deal with effectively, in a cost-effective manner that taxpayers can respect and support.

I thank you for giving this testimony the attention I believe it deserves,

Gregg Heacock