

the MEL GABLERS'
Educational Research Analysts
Newsletter

Inside ...
elementary Science
& high school Literature
textbook rankings

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Hard numbers for "decodability" a national first

Texas transforms fight for phonics Rebuffs own staff, calls opponents' bluffs

Children were the winners when Texas' elected State Board of Education (SBOE) — with the unanimous backing of its heroic conservative members — ordered major publishers at its November meeting to raise to 80% the decodability level of their Grade 1 Reading programs submitted for 2000 local Texas adoption. When some said the Board could not or should not so vote, SBOE conservative Dr. Richard Neill of Fort Worth replied: *"I am willing to fall on the sword for this issue."*

All real phonics programs are fully decodable. "100% decodability" means they contain only phonetically regular words ("run," "sit"), all of whose sounds have been taught, plus phonetically irregular words ("said," "was") that have been taught. This is the opposite of the failed "whole language" approach that cripples so many readers. Texas is the first to mandate a specific percent decodability. "80% decodability" is the new starting point for future phonics gains.

Demanding 80% decodability was gutsy as well as right. Texas' SBOE broke publicly with its own staff, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which had told publishers the rules required only 51% decodability. The Board rejected the usual claim that some companies might not submit textbooks next time if it overruled TEA so late in the adoption process. It ignored liberals' pretense that it lacked authority to set standards. It defied bogus hints of a publishers' lawsuit.

TEA clearly went too far this time. Texas SBOE conservatives have been saying the state education bureaucracy is out of control, illegally exercising Board prerogatives. Early in their writing phase, publishers asked TEA what should be these readers' percent decodability. By law, TEA should have asked the SBOE this. Instead it gave publishers the 51% figure on its own authority. The Board did not learn of it until shortly before it was to vote to approve those programs.

Decodability got all the media attention, but it is not the sole concern in these Grade 1 readers. Comprehensiveness, intensiveness, and consistency of phonics instruction are important issues too, as our comparison chart shows here on page two. We also checked these series' story content in Grades K-3 and found no negative or evil themes, though some stories are bland or boring. You may be interested in our standard review criteria for judging story content at all grade levels.

Most of the "conforming" programs on our comparison chart had been more consistently "whole language" in earlier versions. Some publishers were more organized and coherent in revising these for Texas adoption. Their series are thus more purged of "whole language" vestiges than others. Hence our chart's spectrum showing relatively strong or weak phonics cores. ("Conforming" and "nonconforming" are Texas' terms for whether they meet all state standards.)

"Hitherto hath the LORD helped us." — 1 Samuel 7:12