

Common Core Will Bore. Will Students Snore?

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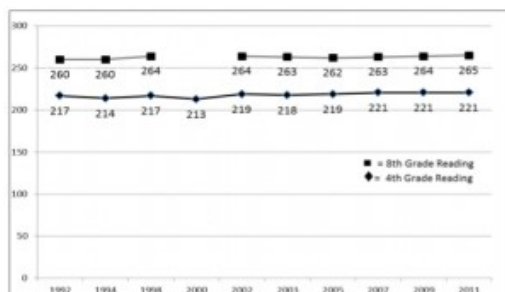
The signature legislation of George W. Bush, No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) extended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, ESEA focused on improving the academic achievement of educationally disadvantaged students (EDS), often members of minority groups attending schools in metropolitan areas.

Each succeeding extension of ESEA has emphasized various factors. NCLB added accountability and high-stakes testing—and the requirement that the reading and math scores of *all* students would be at least “at grade level” by 2014. In short, as far as reading was concerned, each student would become at least an average reader. It didn't happen because it couldn't happen.



Regardless of the activity, knowledge, or skill, 50% of persons will always be *below* average. That's what average means: half score above average, and half score below average—a statistical certainty that no one in Washington, DC apparently understood when writing NCLB.

After spending several hundred *billion* dollars to fund NCLB, student achievement in reading and math has remained unchanged. Since 1969, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) has assessed long-term changes in academic performance among students in U.S. public and private schools. Scores have remained remarkably similar for all children regardless of socioeconomic status (see figure below with NAEP reading results for 4th and 8th graders, 1992-2011). Moreover, the achievement gap between EDS and economically advantaged peers *has* not markedly diminished. The content of the reading curriculum for Common Core varies little from that of NCLB, the focus remaining on learning to identify letters and barking at print (pronouncing words).



The reputed architect of Common Core, David Coleman, advocates *close* reading. A former Rhodes scholar, Coleman majored in philosophy and English literature but

lacks any teaching experience. Close reading requires students to spend several hours or days on a single passage. For example, Coleman has recommended spreading the instruction of the 266-word Gettysburg Address across 5 days! Close reading, which means “reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension” (Boyles, 2013), is slow reading—and slow reading does not result in comprehension anymore than a listener comprehends the content of a lecturer speaking slowly. The basic flaw in

Coleman's misunderstanding of reading is there is meaning in print. It is the reader who *assigns* meaning to text. (I will address this concept in a future piece.)

What happens when 20 adults read the same Robert Frost poem? When asked to identify Frost's meaning, how many meanings would readers identify? Do you expect them to identify a single meaning, several meanings, perhaps even 20 meanings? Readers use ink marks and white space to reconstruct the author's meaning. The only way to know *the* intended meaning is asking the author, which is seldom possible. Yet it is Coleman's belief that if readers dig deep enough, they will uncover layers of meaning and comprehend deeper. In fact, close reading results in predicting potential meanings, but it does not result in identifying with certainty the author's intended meaning. Coleman's approach to reading instruction consists of lengthy exercises in text analysis and critical thinking, not learning to read more proficiently.

In any case, the comprehension of speech (sounds) and the comprehension of print (meanings represented by ink marks and white space) require rapidly processing print. Slow reading doesn't work, careful reading doesn't work, and accurate reading doesn't work. A slow, accurate, careful reader cannot process print fast enough to comprehend. And the failure to process print rapidly prevents the reader from developing reading proficiency.

It is bad enough that well-intentioned but misdirected reading instruction in schools continues to focus on letters and words instead of on comprehension. Close reading instruction based on Coleman's Common Core principles will interfere with reading and learning to read—and bore readers. During the coming era of Common Core, schools and students will become three-time losers: Classroom instruction will limit the potential to improve students' reading proficiency, reading scores will remain static—and a nation of bored readers will learn to dislike reading.

Note: For parents and teachers wanting to understand reading and effective strategies for its instruction, read Frank Smith's outstanding book, *Reading Without Nonsense*.