CREATING MASTERS OF OUR LANGUAGE

Written by Mrs. Maegen Satcher, Hillsdale K-12 Education Office

One of the most unique aspects of the curriculum at Hillsdale K-12 schools is the literacy program, *Literacy Essentials*, whose roots date back to the Orton-based method of teaching literacy. Utilizing this method Hillsdale K-12 schools stand apart from how literacy is taught in traditional public schools because we are teaching the logic of English. Since the sounds of the English language are not represented in a one-to-one correspondence with the alphabet, the alphabetic code must be taught because learning to read and write is not natural. Additionally, there are a large number of rules within the English language. *Literacy Essentials* provides scholars with a "toolbox" that is a combination of the sounds, known as phonograms, and the rules of the English language.

Interestingly enough, spelling is taught first because spelling moves from sound to print. There are 42 sounds in the English language, 26 letters in the alphabet, and 72 letter combinations that represent the sounds. Why? Simply, English is a conglomeration of a myriad of different languages. If a child has the ability to spell a word, he/she will be able to read it. On the other hand, if a child can read a word, he/she may not be able to spell it.

What is a phonogram? Phono means sound, and gram means write. We combine these two parts to teach scholars that a phonogram is a written representation of a sound. Another phrase for phonogram is spelling pattern. For example, oa and oe are different spelling patterns for the long o sound. We essentially teach scholars to write and read phonograms while learning them.

Literacy Essentials instruction begins in writing. Correct handwriting formation of the first 26 phonograms, known to parents as the letters of the alphabet, is taught while scholars are simultaneously learning the sounds through explicit, teacher-led direct instruction. Proper handwriting formation encompasses sitting with correct posture, correctly holding a normal- sized, six-sided pencil in the most appropriate manner to eliminate muscle strain and fatigue, holding and slanting paper at the best angle on the desk while writing, and teaching terminology for the lines on paper. Handwriting instruction commences with scholars practicing the strokes used in phonogram formation, and progresses as, scholars are taught to write phonograms using the categories of strokes (i.e. clock letters, short and tall line letters, and dash stroke letters). Instruction follows the sequence of hearing it, seeing it, saying it, and writing it. From the very beginning, students are taught correctly. Scholars do not simply copy letters from the board. The teacher models how to write a phonogram. He/she erases it, and then, scholars talk through the formation as they practice on their own paper.

Scholars move from learning phonograms to combining them to make real and nonsense words. After the first 26 phonograms are learned, scholars then begin formal spelling instruction. In kindergarten, scholars learn approximately 200 words. In first through third grade, scholars learn approximately 24 new words per week. There is constant repetition in the form of short, quick bursts of spelling instruction throughout the school day to move the words into their long-term memory. In

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traditional schools, there is typically a single block of reading instruction with little emphasis on spelling. By the end of third grade, scholars have been explicitly taught approximately 2,200 words. Since scholars can spell a large number of words, they are able to read many words. The formative years from kindergarten to third grade are spent building a "toolbox" that is comprised of the phonograms and rules of the English language. In fourth through sixth grade, scholars will use their mental toolbox and learn content-specific words from their history, science, and literature classes. There is a shift from orthography to morphology and etymology in these grade levels. Furthermore, the benefits to the brain are enormous as it teaches a way to organize information and complex thinking that carries into other subjects at school and in life.

How are the Hillsdale K-12 schools different than traditional public schools? First, we do not practice spelling by using letter names. It is very important to understand that spelling using letters does not help scholars learn to read. Secondly, we do not send spelling lists home for scholars to practice using the aforementioned practice of using letter names. We affirm that using letter names to spell words is an incorrect and harmful practice. Thirdly, we do not promote inventive spelling practices. From the beginning, scholars are taught explicitly; they practice correctness in both handwriting formation and spelling from their very earliest days in school. Fourthly, our teachers introduce a concept, repetitively practice the concept, and check for scholars' mastery of the concept. Fifthly, grammar instruction begins in kindergarten and increases in complexity throughout the years. Our methods produce scholars who can write beautifully, spell well, and read effectively. Lastly, we are producing masters. Masters in handwriting. Masters in spelling. Masters in reading. Masters in writing and composition.

To conclude, it is imperative for families to understand that spelling/orthography is the most challenging subject scholars will face during the day. They must take the responsibility of participating and paying attention in class to fully reap the benefits. The long-term payoff is enormous.

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WHY SPELLING LISTS ARE NOT SENT HOME

Written by Mrs. Maegen Satcher, Hillsdale K-12 Education Office

Parents often ask teachers for spelling lists. Understanding that schools within the Hillsdale K-12 network use a systematic phonics instruction within a full literacy program is crucial. By systematic, we mean that we teach our scholars the sounds that letters and letter combinations make; we teach them to break words apart into syllables; and we teach them the rules of the English language. Written languages follow a code. We teach our scholars the English code through phonograms and spelling rules. It has been over a hundred years since students in America have learned literacy this way. When considering spelling, you should not compare how you learned to spell with how your child is learning.

Our approach is wholly different than that of neighboring, traditional, public schools. Firstly, we completely reject the whole language approach, also known as the look-and-say or sight word method. Secondly, while most schools have started to recognize the need for phonics instruction, I argue that none of them have an adopted method that meets the breadth and depth that *Literacy Essentials* provides, hence why they continue to rely on sight words as part of their reading instruction. Conversely, our scholars are learning the why behind everything they encounter in their day, including how words are spelled.

Most parents have scholars enrolled at Hillsdale K-12 because they desire a return to traditional teaching methods. *Literacy Essentials* is a return to the way students in this country were taught to read and spell until about the 1930s, when phonics instruction was limited to systematic phonics instruction and practice in reading from Noah Webster's book, *The Blue Backed Speller*. Implementing change in the educational system is a slow process; it takes decades for systemic change to occur. That is exactly how the whole language approach superseded the once common sensical, systematic phonics approach to reading instruction, and it all started with a cow.

Back in 1846, a young man was having breakfast and reading the newspaper in a boarding house. A little girl crawled up into his lap. Her father could be seen milking a cow through the kitchen window. The word "cow" was also printed in the newspaper. The man pointed to the cow and then to the word. The little girl realized it was the word "cow." That's all it took. An idea was sparked to teach reading in a whole different way. Up to this point, Americans were taught the code of the English language, the phonograms and the rules. This new method of looking at the shape and length of a word began to gain traction. It took almost 100 years, but, by the 1950s, the whole language approach permeated classrooms nation-wide. No research ever proved that whole language was superior to phonics instruction. Some researchers even went as far as to intentionally skew the data when comparing the whole language approach to phonics. Researchers used the definition of phonics very loosely. Their method was actually an inductive form of phonics, not systematic like what is offered at Hillsdale K-12 schools. With whole language, children were limited to learning a certain number of words per year. Systematic phonics instruction differs in that it teaches a child to read through spelling

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so the number of words that a child can read once they've learned how to read is too large to be counted.

A portion of the English language is irregular and doesn't follow the rules; however, the *Literacy Essentials* reading program addresses these irregularities. Scholars are explicitly and directly taught these regularities and irregularities. They are not left to their own devices to inductively figure it out.

At newer schools, many of our scholars have not had the opportunity to learn systematic phonics instruction with the breadth and depth offered through *Literacy Essentials*. Our teachers understand these students have many years of bad habits that must be corrected. It takes the application of virtue to learn orthography as an upper elementary scholar. Perseverance is required to strive to do one's best and overcome orthography's challenge. Responsibility is essential. Because this method is multi-sensory, scholars have to see it, say it, hear it, and write it (see previous article.) If any part of their brain is not involved in the lesson when implementing this method, their performance on orthography tests will falter. As parents, encourage your child to do their part. Is he/she speaking when their teacher requires a choral response? Is he/she writing and saying the sounds when they are required to do so? Does your scholar correct their word when it has been dictated to the teacher? Parents, you can help us by respecting the approach we use, doing research to better understand why systematic phonics instruction is superior to the whole language approach (including spelling by letter names), and understanding that all scholars learn at a different pace––especially if they have years of bad habits to undo. Patience is necessary and appreciated.

For more information, please visit: https://www.accessliteracy.com/parents.

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