

# Teaching Amid the Rocket's Red Glare

by Ken Goodman, Professor Emeritus, University of Arizona

According to the *National Review*, William Buckley's opinion magazine, the reading wars aren't over because teachers haven't all been whipped into line. In California and in Texas in particular, but in other states including Minnesota, too, teachers and administrators are under tremendous pressure to move to a small number of commercial phonics programs.

The Los Angeles school board, itself under heavy political pressure, voted that all schools whose mean score in reading is below the 50% level must adopt Open Court, Distar (aka SRA Mastery Reading) or Success for All. Nevermind that in doing so they violated state adoption procedures.

I'm now retired from the Ivory Tower of the university, so the slings and arrows of outrageous disinformation, defamation, and libel can't threaten my livelihood or my professional career. There's something to be said for not drawing a pay check. But I'm quite aware that there are risks for teachers, administrators and teacher edu-

cators in responding to the pressures to tow the phonics line. Nevertheless, I have given myself permission to advise those of you who are at risk on the choices you have in deciding how to respond to the pressure.

Let me summarize what is being mandated: Using the banner of "research based reading programs" laws are restricting instruction to a small number of phonics programs including some that have been around and discredited for four or five decades. Such programs are intended to become the curriculum and take the lion's share of the school day.

All of the annointed programs tightly control teachers, forcing them to use the exact sequences and procedures specified in the materials. In Success for All schools, where the district pays substantially for the program, monitors come into the class rooms and report non-conformers to their administrators.

In Los Angeles recently a teacher was threatened with charges of insubordination for

supplementing the mandated Open Court with materials from her classroom library.

It is difficult for colleges of education to evaluate student teachers in schools with such programs because there is no way they can show their professionalism, their response to learners and their control of the curriculum.

The view of reading being mandated is essentially that reading is learning to recognize words, and that phonics and phonemic awareness are essentially the beginnings for all learning. In the laws and mandates there is also a quite open contempt for teachers, who are treated as a barrier to improved literacy rather than the only solution.

Advice Number 1: Dropping the term whole language won't help. Dropping use of the term whole language won't keep the wolves at bay. This is about control and not terms. Nor will adding a little phonics to a whole language curriculum or even moving to a more "balanced" program offer any protection. As *National Review* has reported, our enemies see this as a winner take all war.

Advice Number 2: Wait it out. Schools in the United States have decentralized authority in state legislatures and local boards. There is no single authority in the country

or in each state, even with highly repressive laws, that can fire teachers at their will.

It is also true that states lack the resources, in most cases, to fully enforce what the legislatures have mandated. Arizona, for example, has a long history of passing laws which are not enforced and quietly disappear.

In many states the attack on professional education has been so broad that it includes the State department of education shifting the enforcement to appointed state boards. That has some frightening possible repercussions but at least in the short run it will make enforcement more difficult.

So one way teachers and other educators could respond is to close their doors and say to themselves, "This too will pass away."

Advice 3: Avoid self-censorship. One problem of these mean times is that teachers, administrators and teacher educators may, in trying to save themselves, over-interpret the mandates and surrender to what they believe they will bring even before the enforcement comes.

It's particularly tempting for administrators to avoid anything and to require teachers to avoid anything that might get the school or administrator into trouble with anyone. There is however, no safe ground to retreat to.

What *National Review* wants is total control of teaching and learning in the classroom. So they are not interested in balance, compromise or anything other than total surrender.

Advice 4: Move. Another option teachers have is to move if they're faced with the choice of following their own professional judgement or teaching in ways they find unacceptable. If a teacher can't accept the control of Success for All or the nonsense of Spaulding or Distar or they can move to a district or school that is taking a more professional response to the pressure.

Fortunately there is a widening teacher shortage in the United States, and in Minnesota. Experienced, effective teachers should be able to find better situations. My concern is that fine teachers will quit before they will surrender. While I understand why teachers would leave teaching if they're not permitted to teach, I hope that this will come only when all other responses are exhausted and if it comes it will be a group and not an individual decision. We need to support teachers in finding jobs and getting out of untenable situations.

Advice 5: Fight back. Though there is a clear need for teachers to join hands and fight for

their professional rights as teachers and freedom to learn for their pupils, I know this is not an easy choice.

Teachers who choose to fight back have to measure the risks. How much support will they get from their colleagues, the parents of their pupils, their unions, their families? Are they willing to risk loss of their tenure or their income? Can they withstand adverse publicity? There are, of course, different levels of fighting back. It can be quiet or loud, overt or covert, open or discrete. It can be as simple as drawing a line in the sand and saying to a principal I go this far and no farther.

Teachers who choose to fight back should do so from a position of strength. Of course, there is strength in numbers. When we fight back together our friends and enemies have to take notice. And teachers can't fight back without the support of parents of their pupils.

Advice 6: Learn to live under water. The last alternative for teachers is one that many professionals have used to survive and to teach with dignity in the face of administrative mandates, legislative micro-managing and dictatorial administrators.

Such educators bend with the blows but they don't break. They maintain the integrity of the

commitment to their students and their own professional beliefs. Some key strategies of learning to live under water:

- Avoid conflicts and confrontations where possible.
- Document everything that you and your students do.
- Think carefully through why you do what you do and be prepared to state your beliefs.
- Make it clear to your pupils why you do what you do in the ways that you do.

- Maintain strong personal relationships with parents and colleagues.
- Seek the support of like-minded teachers and offer support to them.
- Don't ask permission to do what as a professional you believe is best for a class or a pupil.

Let me end my offerings of advice with a statement from my daughter Debra Goodman who found herself harassed by administrators early in her career. She said, "I'd rather be fired for doing a good job of what I believe in than for doing a bad job of what I don't believe in."