

Favoring phonics

Reading director says system is serious about 'Open Court,' phonics, but CMS won't ban other methods that help individual children excel

By **ARAMINTA S. JOHNSTON**

What's the best way to teach children to be successful readers?

Older parents and grandparents probably remember "sounding out" or "decoding" and phonics-based instruction as the way they and their children were taught to read.

Younger parents and their children may be more familiar with "whole language" methods that focus on comprehension and allow "creative spelling" in an attempt to get young students "hooked on reading."

Long-time educators say that

both methods of teaching reading work – but one method works better for some children and the other works better for others.

The CMS system has decided, however, to adopt a single, system-wide method of elementary reading instruction beginning next fall: the phonics-based Open Court reading series for grades K-5. Two other series will be used for higher grades.

The Open Court decision is controversial among CMS instructional staff, since it largely eliminates a teacher's classroom judgment about which teaching

method is most successful for which student.

Sources say that CMS Supt. Eric Smith's recent backtracking on an earlier commitment to take control of assigning teachers to poverty schools was made in exchange for a commitment from teacher organizations to support Open Court in the classroom.

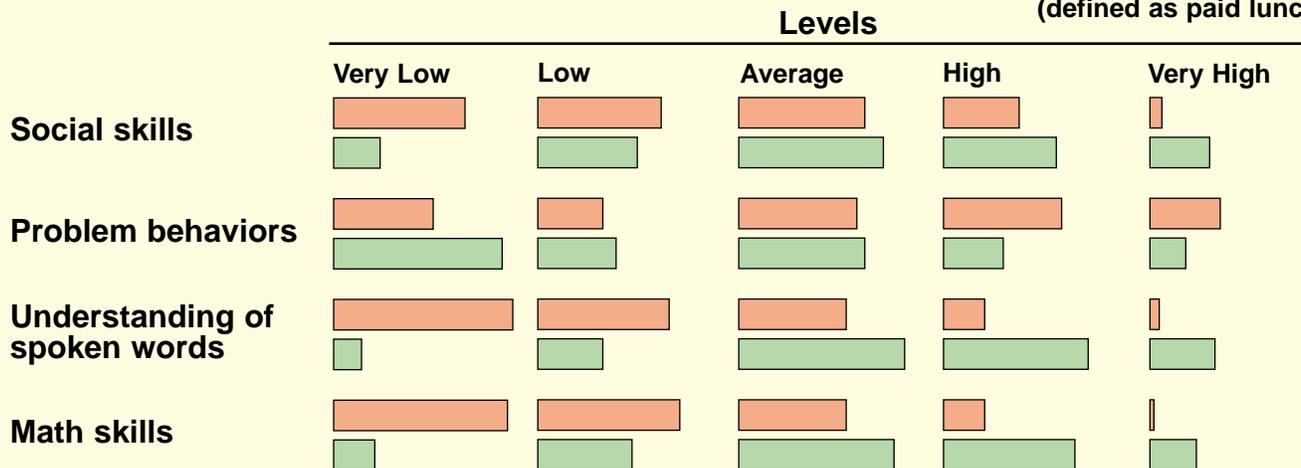
Frances Bessellieu, director of reading for CMS and a recent hire from Wilmington-New Hanover County, N.C. schools, speaks highly, however, of the strengths of the Open Court approach.

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N.C. kindergartners: Prepared for school or not, by family income

The study of kindergartners released last week by the Frank Porter Graham Center could just have altered that classic line from the '92 Clinton campaign into its summary: It's the poverty, stupid! A statewide sample of children was studied last fall for skill levels important to school success. The results, reported by family income levels, are below.

 Low income (defined as on free- or reduced-price lunch)
 High income (defined as paid lunch)



SOURCE: "North Carolina's Kindergartners and Schools," a report of research on N.C. kindergartners released April 23 by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. Research was funded by the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development. All bars are proportional, with the longest bar (Understanding of spoken words, Very Low) representing 38%, the shortest bar (Math skills, Very High) representing 1%.

Favoring phonics: CMS picks approach

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In a Monday interview with the Swann Fellowship board of directors, Bessellieu cited a recently often-quoted figure from a Charlotte Chamber of Commerce study which claims that 45% of the Charlotte workforce is functionally illiterate – that is, reads on a fourth grade level or less.

Current fourth-graders, she said, are not reading on grade level, adding that among fourth-graders, 44% of white students, 73% of African American students, 86% of Hispanic students, and 23% of Asian students are not reading at grade level.

The high percentage of Hispanic students not on grade level in reading raises the question of the degree to which second-language fluency is a problem, although the high percentage of Asian students on grade level suggests that there are other issues involved in reading instruction and success.

Bessellieu, however, points to the percentage of students of all ethnic groups who are not succeeding as readers and says, “we’ve got to do something different.”

Open Court, she says, “is effective for how children learn, according to the research.”

Thirty-five years of research, Bessellieu says, prove that Open

Court is effective as a teaching method.

In addition, she notes, a number of urban school systems throughout the nation – Sacramento, Houston, Baltimore, and Fort Worth – with student populations not very different from CMS have anywhere from three to six years of experience with the program and are satisfied with the results.

According to Bessellieu, Sacramento and Houston have seen especially satisfactory growth in reading scores.

She adds, however, that possibilities for elementary reading instruction in CMS will not be limited solely to the phonics method championed by Open Court.

“We don’t want to lose the motivation to read,” Bessellieu says. “We don’t want to drill and kill.” Whole language teaching methods, with their emphasis on content, she acknowledges, have demonstrated success at getting children to enjoy reading.

While citing the value of phonics method strategies of “decoding” and “word-attack skills,” she denies that the adoption of Open Court means an exclusion of other methods of reading instruction.

Regarding reading achievement, however, Bessellieu says, “This administration is not playing. We’re not going to stand for any excuses. It’s going to be ‘drive this train or find another train.’ I believe that with all my heart.”

Direct What?

In direct instruction, the teacher introduces a sound or a word and ALL children repeat it. Errors are corrected immediately. Repetition is key. In a research paper, Frances Bessellieu wrote about how a 1998-'99 class of mostly disadvantaged students reacted to direct instruction:

“The students were quite attentive, and disruptive behavior... decreased significantly.... Students were making sure that all group members were getting the opportunity to answer questions and respond to the prompts.... Equity and equal participation became increasingly important to the children... In other words, direct instruction lessons seem to foster precisely the skills (perceptual, action), sentiments and moral principles that enable students and teachers to participate competently in them.”

www.uncwil.edu/people/kozloffm/dilearningcomm.html

Q&A on Reading

From a CMS sheet on K-5 program that begins this fall.

Q. Why is CMS adopting a system-wide textbook series?

A. ... Almost 28% of third-graders are not reading on grade level, and the gap between African-American and white students system-wide is 30 percentage points, 10% higher than the rest of the state. It is clear ... that CMS has reached a plateau in reading achievement....

Q. What is the Open Court textbook series?

A. ... It’s a direct instruction model based on phonics and decoding for grades K-5. It emphasizes explicit phonics and comprehension skills, balanced with extensive reading of decodable texts.... The National Reading Panel found that such synthetic phonics approaches produced the highest gains in beginning reading skills....

Q. Will teachers get training?

A. CMS will hold three-day summer institutes for all teachers, who will be paid their regular salaries, not just a tiny stipend.

Quote: “We are legally, morally, ethically and professionally obligated to select a research-based textbook that will be effective for the largest number of students.” – Supt. Eric Smith

Tips for parents:

- Read to your children 20-30 minutes a day.
- Take your child to the library.
- Encourage a variety of reading materials.
- Ask your child to read to you or to a sibling.
- Discuss topics that interest the child.
- Talk about the plot, main characters, ending and what your child thought about the book.

A school vision everybody can buy?

McCull puts in words many people's hopes for equity, neighborhood schools; and yet, achieving equity in a separated city will require something more

In the days before last week's close of his career at Bank of America, Hugh McColl Jr. offered interviewers a range of observations. What he said in two interviews about Charlotte-Mecklenburg education is below.

The vision that emerges is one many citizens share: a school in the neighborhood, a school as good as every other one, a school that spends whatever's necessary to help every child succeed.

It's a vision similar to the one advanced by a Charlotte Chamber

of Commerce committee. The committee is led by Ed Dolby, one of the banking industry's highest ranking African Americans.

It's a vision not unlike that of the April 3 school board resolution on pupil assignment.

And yet, and yet.

It's a vision that in today's Charlotte-Mecklenburg will leave our local government operating racially and economically segregated schools.

Legalisms aside, the vision ignores the spirit of decades of

court orders and a 1971 U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

It abandons decades of community effort to learn to be one people.

It's an alluring vision that just ignores one hard-learned truth: Separate will never be equal.

The vision this community is searching for is not a mystery. In fact, it is already established public policy, and is emblazoned in big brass letters on a wall at the Education Center. The vision is

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The Leader interview

McCull's comments on education in a Q&A published by The Charlotte Leader April 20 and posted on www.leadernews.com.

Q. What is the most important issue facing Charlotte today?

A. I think the public schools and their outcome are the singularly most important thing in this city, and it's so far ahead of what's second. We tend to talk about (issues that rank) second, third and fourth, but to be very honest we're at the edge of the cliff of damaging our reputation as a progressive and forward-thinking city.

Truthfully, all thoughtful citizens should be working together shoulder to shoulder to sup-

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The Observer interview

McCull's comments on education in a Q&A with the Charlotte Observer, as posted on www.charlotte.com on April 25.

Q. You mentioned education in passing as something that everybody supports.

A. One would hope.

Q. And yet, we have a really long way to go if we're going to educate all the children. And it's not just a local problem. It's a national problem.

A. But we seem to be able to complicate it locally.

Q. When you look at something like that, that is so important to the future of our region, what do you wish would happen that is not

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A school vision everybody can buy?

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“to ensure that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system becomes the premier urban, integrated system in the nation in which all students acquire the knowledge, skills and values necessary to lead rich and full lives as productive and enlightened members of society.”

Most workplaces today are integrated.

Most corporate cultures take stern measures at the first sight of discrimination in any form. In that regard, these companies are not unlike the courts of the '50s and '60s and '70s.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg was first among American cities to feel the brunt of busing, the courts' last-resort tool to force desegregation.

The tool wasn't for the long term; it was just a stop-gap until a community created its own ways to assure justice for all.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg hasn't achieved justice. In three decades, court orders were ignored, schools weren't built, resources weren't shared.

There's little to warrant faith that a system of neighborhood schools will not, after awhile, once again leave minorities and the poor the dregs when it comes to public resources.

Or as one Charlotte leader puts it, if you've touched the stove every 5 minutes for an hour and been burned each time, even if the stove gets cold it will take awhile before you want to touch that stove again.

Today's task is the same as it was in the 1960s, or the 1860s: Achieve a just society.

The task is made all the more difficult today because there may be no court, maybe not even a Hugh McColl, to bully us into doing the right thing.

Leader interview

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port the (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools) superintendent in moving the ball forward. We should not look to the courts to tell us how to run our school system. This cannot be a good answer.

And so men and women of good will should be sitting down together and finding the common ground with each other. And if we don't do that, we will not get the economy you're talking about. We will not get the diversity of businesses that we need unless we do a better job of educating all our children. And that means raising our standards and achieving them.

(The school assignment issue) is a problem recruiting right this minute. We've never had a problem recruiting into Charlotte before, and it's starting to bite in. We're in the paper too much, our fight is.

And truthfully, I doubt there is a parent out there, or a grandparent like I am, who doesn't really want their kids to go to a neighborhood school. I think we all want our kids to go a neighborhood school.

And having said that, we want that school to be as good as any other damn school in the city. Period. Just as good of teachers, just as good physically, books, materials, the whole nine yards. The building is the least important. The most important is the teachers, materials for the children, and a good, strong, solid curriculum.

And if there are people who are disadvantaged because of a bad start, we need to spend the money to catch them up. We should agree on that and do it. It's not complicated. We should quit fighting with each other. We should have neighborhood schools, all of which should be good.

www.leadernews.com

Sound off! for quality education

Your words in support of a quality, equitable, integrated education can help make the case for community support of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Pick up your pen! Or get your mouse in motion! Here's information on how to submit your letters to area media.

The Charlotte Post: By e-mail: thepost@clt.mindspring.com; by fax: 704-342-2160; by mail: Editor, The Charlotte Post, 1531 Camden Road, Charlotte, NC 28203-4783.

The Charlotte Observer: By e-mail: opinion@charlotteobserver.com; by fax: 704-358-5022; by mail: The Observer Forum, The Charlotte Observer, P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230-0308.

The Charlotte World: By e-mail: warren.smith@thecharlotteworld.com; by fax: 704-503-6691; by mail: 8701 Mallard Creek Road, Charlotte, NC 28262-9705.

The Leader: By e-mail: editor@leadernews.com; by fax: 704-347-0358; by mail: 800 E. Trade St., Charlotte, NC 28202-3014

Creative Loafing: By e-mail: charlotte@creativeloafing.com; by fax: 704-522-8088; by mail: P.O. Box 241988 Charlotte, NC 28224-1988.

Educate!: By e-mail: SwannFello@aol.com; by fax: 704-342-4550; by mail: 1510 E. 7th St. Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

Observer interview

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happening?

A. I wish we would get past the rhetoric and move on. I think we have a very good (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools) superintendent in Eric Smith. He's a terrific guy. I think that most Americans regardless of their ethnic background would like their kid to walk to school, a neighborhood school. That failing, to ride their bike to a neighborhood school. That's what I did in Bennettsville. I rode my bike to school. But I had friends who lived in the country who came by bus. So most of us would like a neighborhood school either for our children or our grandchildren.

But there's also this issue of equity that we're talking about it, but the truth is we haven't done what we've said we were going to do. We've built a new school in the suburbs and let the inner city schools go down and we bus the inner city children out. I think we should have neighborhood schools. If I were running things as a czar, all the schools would look exactly alike. Nobody would have a better school than the other. Now, the kids could paint them and do anything they wanted to and make them look different. And I would have, if I had kids who were behind others for whatever reason, then I would lower the student-teacher ratio and I'd pay the difference to see that the finished product was the same. I'd do what it took, in other words.

Now, I think a great city like Charlotte should be able to do that. And well-meaning citizens, regardless of their economic background or their ethnic background, ought to agree on equity and neighborhood schools. And equity means – I don't like the word compensatory, that's not the right word – remediation where it needs to be. And if it's intense education, hey, do it. If it costs more money... Just to illustrate it, if it cost \$6,000 per pupil (living in) Ballantyne and \$10,000 at Belmont-Seigle Avenue, hey, do it. And let's quit arguing about it. And then let's be honest about it. Let's pay attention. Let's don't think we can fix it one day and walk off from it. Now I think we can do that. And I think 80 percent of the people want to do that. Maybe 90.

Q. What's keeping us from that?

A. The 10 percent who somehow see that as something bad, for one reason or another ... costs too

much for remedial work. There are people who have attitudes, as you know, that are unreasonable. If I could do one thing that's what I would do. I would fix that.

Why would you fix it? Because, hey, if we want social peace in this city, that is, not having people hold each other up and all other kind of things like that, the first thing we have to do is educate people.

And then if we want prosperity we want everybody to be educated enough to have a good job and have a home. Because if people have homes they behave in a socially peaceful way. And they have pride in themselves. So this is what I would do if I were the czar. But, not being the czar, I can't get that done.

Q. So being the czar is not in your future plans?

A. No I don't think I'm going to get to be czar.

www.charlotte.com/banking/0425mccoll.htm

Calendar

May

- 5** District Six meeting, 9 a.m., Matthews Presbyterian Hospital community room.
- 8** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.
- 10** Curriculum committee, Board Room, 9:30 a.m.
- 15** Bond Oversight Committee, 7:30 a.m., Building Services
- 15** Personnel/Policy Committee, 3 p.m., Board conference room.
- 15** School board meeting, Board Room, 6 p.m.

Educate! a newsletter of The Swann Fellowship

1510 E. 7th St. Charlotte NC 28204
704-342-4330 SwannFello@aol.com Locally produced content © The Swann Fellowship. Lucy Bush, president; B.B. DeLaine, vice president. Published since September 2000. 6-week avg. circ. through last issue: 2,218.

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The name: The Swann Fellowship was named for Darius and Vera Swann, who on behalf of their son James became the lead plaintiffs in Swann vs. Mecklenburg in the 1960s. Darius Swann was the first African American Presbyterian missionary ever assigned outside of Africa. His experiences in India led him to appreciate the value of an integrated society for human development.

The vision: As people of faith, our vision is that all children in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System will have excellent educational

opportunities which are both equitable and integrated.

The background: Formed in 1997 out of several Charlotte religious congregations, the Fellowship focuses on being a witness to the value of diversity, and educating the public on public school issues as they relate to this and allied subjects. The Swann Fellowship is a non-profit organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 56-2106776. Financial information about this organization and a copy of its license are available from the State Solicitation Licensing Branch at 1-888-830-4989. The license is not an endorsement by the state.

Briefs

KC takeover: Missouri legislators were talking last week about a state takeover of the Kansas City school system, where low achievement has brought charges that the elected school board has been micromanaging rather than setting policy. The week began with Supt. Benjamin Demps' resignation.

www.kcstar.com



Gains after vouchers: Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby studied test gains at low-income Milwaukee schools in the first two years after a voucher program was widened and raised from 1,600 to 8,000 the number of children using vouchers to leave the public schools. The scores improved, as did the schools' marketing. Was it the threat of losing even more students that was responsible? Will gains continue after that first rapid improvement from very-very-low scores to just low scores? Hoxby told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, "It may be easier for them to pull up their socks. The point is that they weren't pulling up their socks before. It's the timing that makes it interesting."

www.jsonline.com



Pre-K falloff: Georgia, which is financing a pre-kindergarten program with its lottery, has been following 3,600 1997 "graduates" of the program. Leaving pre-K, all children are on equal footing; by second grade, the significant shared factor among children that are behind is low family income, says Gary Henry at Georgia State's Applied Research Center. University of Georgia school reform expert Carl Glickman told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that "children in low-income neighborhoods attending pre-kindergarten programs are more likely to advance to elementary

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Students: Start Your Word Processors!

Educate! invites young people in our schools to contribute to the writing that appears in each issue. No fortune is offered, and fame is not absolutely guaranteed. But to be a published author at a young age is more than can be claimed by many a successful adult author.

So launch your mice or pick up your pens and write us something that you yourself have experienced. What a field trip meant to you. The value of a lunch buddy. What you value in a teacher. How many left turns into traffic your bus driver must make (yes, a fellow here long ago favored bus routes that only made right turns).

Writing (and artwork and digital photography too) can be e-mailed to SwannFello@aol.com or by fax to 704-342-4550 or by mail to 1510 E. 7th St. Charlotte, NC 28204-2410.

Briefs

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schools that lack the financial resources, top-flight teachers and parental support they need.”

www.accessatlanta.com/partners/ajc



Expectations achieved: A New York Board of Regents follow-up on a 1996 revamp of special education finds that, lo, if you test such children, more will pass than if you don't test them. The insistence on testing special ed children has led to removing some from the program. State officials told the New York Times “the statistics strongly suggested that many special-education students should not have been classified as ‘disabled’ in the first place, and were given the designation only because schools did not know what else to do with them.” The state’s population of 402,000 special-ed students includes 5% mentally retarded, 54% “learning disabled” and 15% emotionally disturbed. The latter two categories “are often catchalls for difficult students,” the Times said.

www.nytimes.com



Teacher of the year: President Bush Monday announced the selection of Michele Forman as national teacher of the year. Forman, 55, was born in Biloxi, Miss. and has been teaching for 31 years in Vermont, the last 15 years as a

social studies teacher at Middlebury Union High. Forman told a Rose Garden audience, “We understand that our classrooms must be places where each child can achieve excellence, and where each child must be supported to the extent necessary to allow this to happen.”

Speaking of classrooms, courtesy of the Rutland Herald, let us look at what this esteemed teacher’s classroom looks like.

In the room are plants, globes, art projects and artifacts from across the globe. There’s a couch. Fruit and crackers are available, and hot chocolate, coffee and tea are served several times a week. Every student’s photo is on the wall. All students’ birthdays are celebrated. And when all the college applications are in the mail, there’s a party.

Forman almost never lectures.

Inner change

Mecklenburg Ministries offers to facilitate sessions at churches or other community groups exploring “issues of race, power and prejudice.” Weeknight programs run three hours once a week for four weeks. Weekend workshops begin Friday evening and continue Saturday. For more information, contact Shantel Ingram, program director, at 704-347-2404 or shantel.ingram@meckmin.org

She doesn’t give tests because the essays, art projects, mock trials, debates and skits make it clear where the children are. Said senior Jennie Schniedwind to the Herald, “Even though there’s these rigid AP guidelines, it’s so laid-back. It’s catering to the student, rather than the guidelines.”

www.whitehouse.gov

www.rutlandherald.nybor.com



No. 1 at schools: Market researcher IDC has ranked Dell Computer the No. 1 supplier of PCs to the U.S. education market, according to C/Net. Apple Computer had previously been rated No. 1.

<http://news.cnet.com>

For your calendar

There will be 12 projectors, 11 warming cabinets, 10 round tables, 9 audio visual carts, 8 ice cream boxes, 7 or more oil pumps, 6 fax machines, 5 chairs, 4 cafeteria serving lines, 3 gas ranges, 2 electric drills and 1 puppet stage.

Plus 245 computers, 50 TVs, 219 student desks, 21 VCRs, a clothes dryer and lots of other stuff. It’s the annual CMS surplus property auction, May 9, 9 a.m., CMS warehouse, 1132 Pro-Am Drive. By May 9 some of the goods will be picked over: Employees get first dibs.