

# The Politics of Literacy

By DAVID DAVENPORT AND  
JEFFERY M. JONES

**A**FTER DECADES OF debate inside the educational community, literacy policy has recently moved to the larger stage of national politics. Prior to 1997 no federal bill had specifically addressed child literacy as an issue. But in the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush regularly touted his record on literacy, and he and his wife Laura, a former librarian, speak of reading as “the new civil right.” Legislators debate literacy philosophy and methodology — such as phonics versus whole language — and newspaper headlines track how U.S. kids read in comparison with the rest of the world. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which federalizes literacy policy in important ways, is hotly debated in state legislatures, Congress, and federal courts.

The transformation of literacy from an educational concern to a national political issue has been swift and significant. In a sense, literacy has traveled the same federalization road as educational policy generally, moving from

---

*David Davenport is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and distinguished professor of public policy at Pepperdine University. Jeffrey M. Jones is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.*

local school boards and statehouses to our nation's capital in less than a decade. Two former governors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, wrestled with literacy and education at the state level before packing up the problems and bringing them along to the White House. In fact, the road to federalizing literacy policy moves largely through Sacramento, California and Austin, Texas on its way to Washington, D.C.

Playing out literacy on the national political stage reframes everything — the issues, the vocabulary, and the cast of characters. Literacy is not merely a problem now; it is a crisis. Improving literacy is not just an educational or social need; it is essential if the United States is to compete in the new global economy. Everyone seems ready to declare war on the enemy — illiteracy — but experts define and measure the problem differently and propose varied methods of attack. In fact, the several combatants in the war on illiteracy seem to expend as much ammunition firing on one another as they do in attacking the problem. The politicians in Washington, the scholars in their ivory towers, the vested interests in our communities, and the teachers and students in the trenches all seem to be warring among themselves at the same time they are trying to combat the common enemy.

Much was written about literacy when it played on the academic stage as an educational issue. Now that political attention and governmental dollars are involved, it is time to assess literacy on the public policy stage. What can we learn by tracking the politics of literacy? Will greater political attention and government expenditure improve literacy? Can illiteracy be overcome in the twenty-first century?

## Literacy policy travels eastward

ONE WAY TO TRACK the story of how literacy became a national political issue is to follow its path through two key states on its way to Washington, D.C. The story begins, as new political trends often do, in the Golden State, California. There, an ambitious politician, Superintendent of Education Bill Honig, joined forces with advocates of “whole language” instruction to revise the California reading curriculum. Changes in the educational approach of a major state such as California have a corresponding effect on national textbook publishing and on the policies of other states.

In the late 1980s, Honig decided to launch a major reform of California education centered on reading. Some say he was simply doing his job as superintendent of education, but most believe Honig had a larger political agenda, including a possible run for governor of California. Under his leadership, the state initiated a program called Reading Recovery that had been developed by a New Zealand teacher, Mary Clay.

Honig apparently wanted to recast reading instruction in a “great books” format, encouraging the development of reading skills in the context of

## *The Politics of Literacy*

exposing students to rich literature. Perhaps unwittingly, however, he tied his policies to an educational/political movement called “whole language.” The essence of whole language is that, rather than breaking down words into parts such as syllables and phonetic sounds, children are challenged to learn through transactions with the world around them — listening, interpreting, incorporating language in a more natural way. As critics have pointed out, whole language is more of a philosophy of literacy than it is a program or methodology.

In 1994 test results appeared that would provide a report card for Honig’s reforms, and the news was not good. California achievement tests that year showed a decline in reading scores, with the state’s students tying for last among the thirty-nine states tested. A year after the whole language reforms were adopted in San Diego, the percentage of students scoring above the national median plunged from 51 to 25. Experts have subsequently debated the significance of these scores, noting that key test scores for California were not available prior to 1992, making long-term comparisons difficult. Nevertheless, these low reading scores galvanized action in the state capital.

In the fall of 1995 the California legislature passed seven bills targeting literacy, rolling the state’s reading policy back to basics as a matter of law. Marion Joseph, a grandmother who was concerned that her grandson could not read well, became a vocal and effective activist on the issue, persuading not only legislators but also Honig himself that the move to whole language had been a mistake. Dramatic legislative hearings focused on phonics versus whole language with Bill Honig, now converted from whole language, as the leadoff witness. The reading wars in California were bitter and angry, but the outcome was clear, and reading policy had now come onto the larger stage of public policy and politics.

*Texas.* It was not long before our second-largest state, Texas, began to focus on literacy policy as well. Once again a key political figure took the lead as Governor George W. Bush spoke of a literacy crisis that was “obvious in the numbers.” Citing the failure of one in four Texas schoolchildren on the state reading test, Governor Bush called for a return to basics in a major new literacy initiative.

Whereas the main focus of literacy policy in California had been the philosophy or approach — whole language versus phonics — the reform effort in Texas primarily emphasized accountability and testing. Indeed, experts agree that the use of state-mandated testing to reform and improve schools is most fully implemented in Texas, and its efforts are often held up as a model to be employed elsewhere. Some refer to the “Texas miracle,” citing improved student performance. For example, 91 percent of third grade students passed the state reading test in 2004, compared with 76 percent in 1994. State law requires all third graders to pass the reading test to be promoted to fourth grade.

The use of testing to improve literacy is not without its critics. Some argue

that testing does not improve education, but only reveals its uneven quality, especially in poor communities. Others fear that teachers engage in test preparation — teaching to the test — rather than providing students a well-rounded education.

If the educational results of the relatively new testing regime are not yet fully known, the political consequences are more apparent. Governor Bush was widely credited with taking the initiative on a policy issue of major importance and fashioning bipartisan support for a statewide approach to what had previously been a matter of local policy. Mrs. Bush, who helped initiate clinics and grant programs for preschool reading and language, joined her husband in making literacy a visible policy issue.

*Washington, D.C.* Before Governor Bush arrived at the White House, another former governor, Bill Clinton, had already introduced literacy onto the national political stage. During his second presidential campaign in 1996, and in his State of the Union message of 1997, Clinton advocated the America Reads Initiative. He championed national standards and assessment in all subjects and sought federal assistance for literacy efforts. Surprisingly, this was the first attempt to enact federal legislation aimed specifically at literacy for children.

Clinton's approach to the issue was a new twist for Democrats. Rather than championing education and literacy in the traditional language of his party — helping those in need and leveling the social playing field — Clinton urged federal attention to literacy on economic grounds. Both President Clinton and his secretary of education, Richard Riley, were described as “neoliberal” for addressing literacy in functional terms, arguing improvement was needed so that Americans could compete in the global economy and in the information age.

Congress did not climb on the neoliberal bandwagon, however, and Clinton's literacy legislation was blocked. An unusual coalition of Republicans — who felt literacy was best handled by the states — and Democrats — who feared the legislation would further disadvantage minority students — formed to block passage of Clinton's reading and testing agenda. The U.S. Department of Education did manage to fund some of the president's literacy initiatives with discretionary dollars.

President and Mrs. Bush brought even greater activism on literacy to the White House. The Bushes have emphasized family literacy, encouraging parents to read to their children. Whereas President Clinton's goal was that every child should read by fourth grade, President Bush accelerated the timetable to the third grade. The Bush reading initiative would spend some \$5 billion over five years.

How did Bush win the support of congressional Republicans who had previously held that literacy was a state and local matter, not a federal mandate? That part of the story begins in Texas where, as governor, Bush had brought in Reid Lyon of the National Institutes of Health to help design reading and literacy programs. Lyon had been conducting studies on reading

## *The Politics of Literacy*

instruction since 1992 and had become persuaded of the virtues of phonics. He later said he had initially come to Texas suspicious of Bush but signed on as the governor's major ally in reading reform. As President, Bush continued to work with Lyon, who became known as the "reading czar."

It was at this conceptual level that President Bush won over congressional Republicans who also admired phonics and a "back to basics" approach to remedying America's literacy problems. Beginning with a provision in the 1990 Adult Literacy Act, and continuing through the Reading Excellence Act sponsored by Congressman William Goodling in 1997, definitions of reading and basic methodologies had become important, just as they had in California.

Together, Bush, Lyon and congressional Republicans hammered out the historic No Child Left Behind legislation that provides substantial support to states that are making significant progress on educational priorities like literacy and testing. This political marriage brought together those who believe education belongs to the states with those who support federal standards and funding. Essentially, states are required to present aggressive programs of testing and literacy improvement based upon the "back to basics" and phonics approaches that both congressional Republicans and the White House favor. If state plans do not sufficiently follow this path, they are sent back for reworking before funding is released. A policy afterthought less than a decade ago, federal literacy programs now distribute in excess of \$1 billion annually to states and local educational agencies.

### The literacy policy debate

**W**HILE THE POLITICAL debate about literacy has shifted from school districts and state legislatures to Washington, D.C., the underlying policy issues are still hotly contested at all levels. As one commentary observes: "[E]ducation has become a congested area filled with a multitude of organized interests and policymakers, who often have varied concerns about young children, who distinctly define the problems in reading, and who have contrasting beliefs about how the policy process works."<sup>1</sup> Just as declaring war on poverty or drugs at the national level has not solved those intractable problems, a federal attack on illiteracy will not succeed without understanding and addressing the key underlying policy issues. The fundamental conflicts might best be summarized as disagreements over how best to teach literacy, to test for it, and to reform literacy policy.

*How to teach literacy.* "The question of how best to teach beginning reading may be the most politicized topic in the field of education," says Marilyn

---

<sup>1</sup>Julie E. McDaniel, Celia H. Sims, and Cecil G. Miskel, *The National Reading Policy Arena: Policy Actors and Perceived Influence* (University of Michigan, 2000), 15.

Jager Adams in her 1990 book, *Beginning to Read*. Legislators from California to Washington, D.C. have found themselves wrapped up in the debate over two distinct methodologies for teaching literacy: phonics and skills versus the meaning approach. Each camp has its own implicit understanding of the purpose of literacy, and the debates take on political and cultural goals as well as academic methodologies.

The skills instruction approach is often thought of as rote repetition of the alphabet. While the emphasis on recognizing and naming letters is an essential part, the skills approach has evolved to a whole series of building blocks in which students first acquire basic skills and systematically add other tasks. The process begins when students start to identify the connections between

*One intriguing question is whether phonics and whole language might be compatible.*

sounds and symbols, thereby breaking the language “code.” More complex skills and texts are introduced as children improve their ability to read and comprehend language.

Meaning instruction has also evolved over the years. Until the late 1960s, meaning instruction meant the “word” or “look-say” method “in which children learned individual words separately and in sentences and stories, and eventually mastered — either intuitively or explicitly — specific skills for identifying parts of words.”<sup>2</sup> Whole language — using written language as a whole rather than an aggregation of individual words — added an explicit emphasis on the content of what children read. As a result, whole language empowered and even urged a

move from meaningless texts to literature that held meaning to students. Naturally this also opened the door to politicized content and debates over the appropriate literary canon.

Whole language gained significant traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s as educators responded to new research that linked pedagogical methods more directly to educational psychology. But at the same time that many schools were moving from phonics to whole language, testing began to play a larger role in the evaluation of learning and curriculum. When state-level tests were more broadly implemented in 1992, they showed declines in reading which, as demonstrated in California, led to political calls to return to basic phonics instruction. The backlash against whole language and meaning instruction was decisive in many states and even at the federal level. Nevertheless, some educators have argued that whole language was not responsible for the lower test results and that the return to skills and phonics ignores advances in reading research over the last 30 years.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Coles, *Reading Lessons: The Debate Over Literacy* (Hill and Wang, 1998), 12.

<sup>3</sup>See P.D. Pearson, *The Politics of Reading Research and Practice* (Michigan State University, 1999), 5.

## *The Politics of Literacy*

One intriguing pragmatic question is whether phonics and whole language might be compatible. Is it possible to combine the best aspects of phonetic and meaning instruction, or might each method be helpful with certain students? At the moment it is impossible to know, as the two sides are dug in to ideological positions. As Gerald Coles points out in *Reading Lessons*, their present incompatibility is evident even in the language each side uses: “The skills side insists that there is a ‘method,’ while the whole-language side insists theirs is an ‘approach’ or ‘philosophy’” (19-20). But if true progress is to be made against illiteracy, these pragmatic, student-oriented questions will need to be asked.

*How to test for literacy.* Another contentious policy debate is over whether the U.S. is in the midst of a literacy crisis at all. Once you begin to quantify a policy matter such as literacy, as is now done through standardized testing, warring camps line up with differing interpretations of the data. This has certainly been the case as literacy has moved onto the political stage, with some arguing that literacy is now a problem of crisis proportions, whereas others read the testing data with less alarm.

Further complicating matters, there are now three major reading assessments of school-aged children: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Program for International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). NAEP, sometimes called the Nation’s Report Card, has been administered since 1969, but 2003 marked the first year that all 50 states participated. It examines reading results on both a national and state basis at different grade levels, providing an opportunity to examine changes in reading achievement over time. Both PIRLS, which targets fourth-graders, and PISA, which looks at 15-year-olds, provide useful comparisons between U.S. students and their international peers.

One reading of the tests suggests fairly consistent results. Both NAEP and PISA indicate that only three out of 10 U.S. students are proficient readers — that is, they competently read and understand texts. A significant number of children read at a level below basic: 36 percent of fourth-graders, 25 percent of eighth-graders, and 26 percent of twelfth-graders. Unlike mathematics, where scores have risen, reading achievement has remained virtually stagnant for more than 30 years, with no significant increase or decrease in national scores.

Both PIRLS and NAEP report serious reading differences based upon race/ethnicity. Testing confirms the “achievement gap” widely discussed in education policy circles. Black and Hispanic students at all grade levels perform well below their white and Asian peers, and they have made little progress in the last ten years.<sup>4</sup> Internationally, PIRLS and PISA indicate that early on U.S. schoolchildren are near the top in reading achievement com-

---

<sup>4</sup>See *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading Highlights 2002* (National Center for Education Statistics 2002), 13.

pared with students of other countries. But their performance slips significantly between fourth grade and high school, and by age fifteen U.S. students are just average.

From these testing data, a highly influential coalition of politicians, business leaders and conservative academics argues that the U.S. is suffering from a debilitating literacy crisis. Pointing to statistics showing poor overall reading performance, racial disparity, and declining performance relative to international peers, the group pushes for major literacy reform, especially greater accountability and school choice. Otherwise, it argues, the literacy crisis threatens our nation's economic vitality, especially with jobs increasingly relying on high-tech knowledge and literacy skills. The main political agenda of this group is to mobilize the public about illiteracy and to bring about broad-based reform of the educational system.

Another camp, largely supportive of the public school system, believes the rhetoric about a literacy crisis is overblown. Book titles such as *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions* aptly describe this political position. Supporters of the present school system examine literacy data over a longer period of time and find test scores mostly flat over the last 30 years. Consequently they charge that those who would "attack current structures and advocate alternative policy, practice or movement as the solution to our educational ills" have manufactured the language of crisis for political purposes.<sup>5</sup> Advocates of supporting and improving the present system argue for increased resources and greater investment in teacher training and development.

The debate over whether there is a literacy crisis is further complicated by attacks on the tests themselves. One criticism is that the tests and resulting data are not legitimate because the standard for proficiency can be manipulated up or down, especially in the state testing schemes. The fudging is apparent when state test results are compared to NAEP results for the same state.<sup>6</sup> Other concerns include whether literacy testing encourages gamesmanship, teaching to the test, and outright cheating. Researchers continue to debate the merits of testing, and both Democrats in Washington and state legislators have expressed reservations about participating in the No Child Left Behind programs in part because of concerns about the pervasive testing scheme.

*How to improve literacy.* As literacy moved from local and state educational circles onto the national political scene, several competing reform ideas began to emerge. While not always in agreement about the extent of the literacy crisis, reformers shared the conviction that simply maintaining the status quo was not acceptable. As with most reform efforts, the devil is not only in the details, but also in the basic approach.

---

<sup>5</sup>Pearson, *Politics*, 3.

<sup>6</sup>Jennifer Sloan McCombs, [et. al], *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, a Long Uphill Road* (Rand Corporation, 2004)

## *The Politics of Literacy*

Perhaps the most visible reform effort is the one tied to the resurgence of phonics instruction, often called “back to basics.” Although these reforms have culminated during the administration of President George W. Bush, the seeds were planted 20 years ago under President Ronald Reagan. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, a report documenting the poor performance of U.S. students, especially in reading. To stem the “rising tide of mediocrity,” the report recommended that high school graduates be proficient in “Five New Basics.” The first of these focused on literacy, calling on graduates of the school system to be able to do the following:

(a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literacy heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to customs, ideas and values of today’s life and culture.<sup>7</sup>

Other national reports followed in the Reagan years, including Secretary of Education William Bennett’s *Becoming a Nation of Readers and First Lessons*. The latter report cemented the term “basics” in the national lexicon of literacy policy, documenting the advances in our “knowledge about the basic processes involved in reading, teaching and learning.”<sup>8</sup> These reform-minded reports emphasized phonics-based lessons, the use of basal readers and workbooks, increased time on reading, and access to good literature.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, meaning-based instruction also gained a following in the United States. The meaning-based approach largely ignored the mechanics of reading as emphasized in phonics instruction. Instead, its proponents viewed learning to read as a natural process that children acquire as they are exposed to interesting stories and meaningful texts. Such approaches were not new, dating back at least to the 1920s, but gained newfound attention in the 1980s with whole language reforms.

Whole language methods were adopted as a formal education practice throughout the U.S. in the early 90s. The focus on reading comprehension and text engagement fit well with a political climate that favored progressive education and a child-centered curriculum. The adoption was short-lived, however, due to poor reading results and a lack of scientific and theoretical evidence supporting the effectiveness of whole language, especially for at-risk children.

In response to the highly politicized era of whole language versus phonics, educators and politicians sought to overcome bias by insisting on a scientific basis for literacy reforms. While not as catchy as the “back to basics” slo-

---

<sup>7</sup>*A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), 70.

<sup>8</sup>William J. Bennett, *First Lessons* (U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

gan, scientifically verifiable research on reading is the dominant reform approach today. The National Academy of Science conducted the first major report stressing the importance of science in reading. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1998) explored in detail “how literacy can be fostered from birth through kindergarten and the primary grades, including evaluation of philosophies, systems, and materials commonly used to teach reading.” The report captured considerable attention with its evidentiary-based conclusion that excellent instruction grounded in phonics was essential for overcoming barriers to literacy. The Council’s compelling application of the scientific method to literacy — including public verifiability, testable theories and systematic empiricism — essentially rewrote the rules for judging reform.

Two years later, the National Reading Panel sought to build upon and expand the work of the Academy in its report, *Teaching Children to Read*. This report attempted a comprehensive application of scientific methodology to all aspects of reading, including five major topics: alphabets, fluency, comprehension, teacher education, and computer technology. The report found consensus on a number of key instructional methods, including teaching children phonemic awareness through systematic phonics; guided, repeated oral reading; vocabulary development; a mix of reading comprehension techniques; and the use of computer technology. The report acknowledged, however, that much remained to be done in developing a science of reading instruction.

On the policy front, scientifically based reforms arrived with the launch of “Reading First,” a new national initiative created by the No Child Left Behind Act. Nearly \$5 billion was earmarked for distribution to states and territories over the next several years. The Reading First aspect of the act differs from previous national reading programs by specifying that “teachers’ classroom instruction decisions must be informed by scientifically based reading research.” States qualify for funding based upon the number of low-income children served and then provide grants to districts and schools to improve reading achievement. Projects selected must systematically and explicitly teach the five key early reading skills identified in *Teaching Children to Read*, though no list of “sanctioned programs” exists. Even more recently, the president proposed a \$200 million “Striving Readers” initiative. If adopted in 2006, the program would help high school students who read below grade level to improve their reading skills. It is too early to evaluate the outcome of such an approach, but the strong emphasis on science should make the results easier to assess.

In addition to the back-to-basics, whole language, and scientific reform movements, a fourth approach — variously called “new literacy studies” and “cultural literacy” — ventures, as Coles puts it in *Reading Lessons*, “beyond the dominant terms of the debate by pointing to the effects of racism, poverty, politics, and school funding on learning” (26). This reform movement traces its roots to Brazilian-born educator Paulo Freire and his

## *The Politics of Literacy*

book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's work, published in English in 1970, emphasizes the need for people to be aware of their oppression and encourages reading and writing as a means to engage in political action and ultimately achieve liberation.

The policy solutions of cultural literacy do not orient around reading *per se* but deal with social, cultural, institutional, and political interventions. One tactic of this approach supports multiple literacies or different social languages. Supporters of cultural literacy argue that illiteracy "stands not so much for ignorance as for the reality of powerlessness and domination."<sup>9</sup> This relativist approach to literacy finds the search for the best methods of reading instruction to be not only meaningless but potentially harmful. Happily, most proponents of these new literacy studies are housed in the ivory towers of American universities and have not had much impact on the politics or policy of literacy.

### A changed political landscape

**I**F POLITICS IS the art of the possible, what is possible for literacy? Is there a literacy agenda that might be pursued within the present political climate that would result in more children learning to read and write at base levels of competency? Any answer to those questions must take into account the two major political changes that affect the politics of literacy: the increasing federalization of literacy policy and the emergence of more centrist and pragmatic neoconservative and neoliberal leadership on educational matters.

The federalization of literacy policy appears now to be a given, all the more remarkable since this movement has occurred within the past decade. Indeed, as recently as 1996, the Republican platform still called for the elimination of the Department of Education. Yet proactive governors such as Bill Clinton (Arkansas), George W. Bush (Texas), Tom Ridge (Pennsylvania), Richard Riley (South Carolina), Pete Wilson (California), and others began to focus on reading and related educational matters at the state level. Education and literacy became important issues at meetings of governors, and then two active governors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, carried the issues with them to Washington, D.C.

Not everyone agrees that federalizing literacy is a good idea. For example, when President Clinton presented his first federal literacy initiatives in 1997, Republicans voted against them on the grounds that such matters belonged at the state and local levels. Even Vermont's Democratic governor, Howard Dean, rebelled against some of the broader congressional testing

---

<sup>9</sup>Michael Holzman, "Observations on Literacy: Gender, Race, and Class," in *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, Richard H. Bullock, John Trimbur, and Charles I. Schuster, eds. (Boyton/Cook, 1991), 298.

legislation, arguing that it overstepped the limits of federal oversight. Dean said the aggressive new approach to education in Washington amounted to the “federalization of education.”

Nevertheless, education policy generally and literacy specifically appear to be in Washington to stay. President Bush’s methodology has been to establish federal standards and look to states for implementation, an approach that had at least initial support on both sides of the political aisle in the passage of his No Child Left Behind legislation. Today, Democrats and Republicans quibble over the specifics of the act, but there is no movement to remove the literacy matter from the federal arena.

The second, and related, political change is the emergence of neoliberal and neoconservative leaders in Washington who approach the issue in more practical, less ideological terms. The classical liberal view — that we educate to help people grow and break through socioeconomic barriers — gave way to President Clinton’s and Secretary Riley’s neoliberal argument that American children need stronger literacy skills to compete in the global information economy. By the same token, conservatives who have been fighting on the other side of the culture wars, maintaining that literacy is a state and local issue, have lost the initiative to neoconservatives such as President Bush, who believe the role of government should be limited but nevertheless proactive.

In fact, the literacy positions of President George W. Bush and President Bill Clinton are not substantially different. When you add in strong support from the business community for testing and accountability in literacy — key planks of both the Bush and Clinton approaches — there is clearly an emerging political consensus in favor of a strong federal hand leading a pragmatic and proactive approach to literacy. At the moment, there appears to be less enthusiasm for shrill voices debating the cultural issues of literacy and more support for basic methodologies coupled with a strong accountability scheme.

## A brief agenda

**A**SSUMING THAT, FOR the foreseeable future, the action is based in Washington, D.C. and the leaders are neoconservatives and neoliberals who are less ideological and more pragmatic, here is an agenda that the new politics of literacy might be able to advance.

*Teach.* The challenge here would be to get beyond the ideological battles and focus on what will help children read. Washington would do well to declare a cease-fire on the underlying ideological battles over literacy and continue to focus on what is scientifically proven to improve children’s ability to read. Perhaps those committed to the whole language versus phonics battle might explore possibilities of synthesis rather than extending the culture wars in this sensitive arena. With less division over ideology, policymak-

## *The Politics of Literacy*

ers can turn their attention to priorities that actually impact reading development, like providing parents with activities and material for use at home. If the information economy is driving up the demands for literacy, insist that the technology industry become part of the solution by helping to find new methods and solutions for literacy learning.

*Test.* The debate over whether test scores indicate a crisis is not terribly useful. Instead, let us agree that where we now stand — regardless of how it compares across the years — is unacceptable. Public policy should bring the communities of interest together to target realistic gains at each level of proficiency. There is ample evidence that the achievement gap is real and must be addressed. The testing process itself can be improved by breaking results down to the state and local levels. The 2002 NAEP results began to move in this direction for the first time, but even more localized data are needed for parents to know whether their schools are succeeding and to hold schools accountable for improved results. Additionally, test results should be packaged so they can give teachers useful information for addressing areas of need.

*Reform.* Reform should continue along the lines of what scientific research shows best teaches children to read. Much work remains before we can say we have a science of reading development and comprehension, let alone evidence to counter charges and countercharges of political bias. If a teacher's classroom must be based on scientific research, then we must fund the research and train the teachers in what the research shows. As new teaching techniques, curricula, and educational structures are developed, they will help challenge and improve existing methods. After a decent interval, we must test the effectiveness of new federal initiatives such as Reading First in the No Child Left Behind Act.

## New possibilities

ONLY A FEW years ago, an examination of “the politics of literacy” would have made no sense. Literacy was an educational issue, not a matter of public policy, and any politics that attended the discussion would have been inside the academy. Now both Democrats and Republicans alike have indicated a willingness to federalize literacy policy, with all the politics thereto appertaining. An unusual coalition of neoliberals and neo-conservatives has become comfortable setting literacy policy in Washington, D.C. and testing its impact on a state-by-state basis.

Like the war on poverty and the war on drugs, declaring a federal war on illiteracy is likely to meet with mixed success. Nevertheless, if politics is the art of the possible, the changed political climate creates new possibilities for literacy. Literacy is of fundamental importance, and it seems important to take advantage this opportunity for some consensus on literacy policy and renewed efforts to improve the ability of our children to read.