

## Michael Brunner's Address to the General Session of the 1985 Reading Reform Foundation Conference

by Michael Brunner  
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It is truly a pleasure to be with you and among friends. You can't appreciate that remark unless you leave friends and come to Washington, D.C. It is good to see so many of you and I am so delighted to be here with you.

I thought by way of introductory remarks, I have no degrees in reading, — in fact, I have no degrees in education. My BA is in music history and my MA is in library science. I practiced Librarianship for some time in the public schools and a little while in a public library, and I taught six years in library science — which really isn't a science. In 1974, I went to the *State Department of Education* in Idaho where I became a Title 1 consultant; Title 1's now Chapter 1. It took me just a few months to see what the reading problem was.

It was in 1974 or 1975 when I went to see Claire Thomas — it was a tremendous mistake! I got involved with this group, the *Reading Reform Foundation*. I was with the *State Department of Education* for eight years. It provided me with a salary, telephone, and a secretary, but my major thrust for those eight years was to do something about the reading problem. I gave myself about 3 or 4 months to get my feet on the ground and then I brought Oma Riggs to Idaho to do the first workshop in a multisensory approach to direct intensive systematic phonics for 139 teachers in the Twin Falls school district. I got up about four a.m. and drove on ice about 15 miles from Boise to see her teach, to see how to do it, because I knew I just couldn't get her back all the time, especially during the school year.

During the school year, many of the instructors who teach phonics to teachers are themselves teaching. I said, "Well, there is no reason why I can't do this." I started public library work without ever having worked a day of my life in a public library, so I decided there is no reason why I can't teach phonics. I don't think that went over very well with the *Reading Reform Foundation*, but Bettina was down in Scottsdale and I was in Boise, and that was a nice distance. So, I went on doing workshops — Bettina was very tactful and she said, "I really think Mike, you should take the course before you teach it," and I said that sounds reasonable, so I got Mary Gunn to come.

The school which sponsored the workshop was a little elementary school in Payette which had only 10 teachers who wanted to come. Well, 10 teachers wouldn't pay the travel and per diem and Mary Gunn's fee for coming to Idaho and doing a workshop. So, I got inventive. My brother-in-law is a dentist who is in the Kiwanis, and I said, "Look, I have a problem. We can't do the workshop with just the one school sponsoring it, and I don't know how many will show up." He said, "Well, how much money do you need?" And I said, "I need about \$1,600 — the travel and per diem would be about \$500 or \$600 and the fees about \$900. I don't remember exactly how it worked; but the *Reading Reform Foundation* put up the money for the fee, and the *Kiwanis Club* put up the money for the travel and the per diem. In other words, they underwrote me because I didn't know if 12 would show up or 15 or 20. To make a long story short, 65 teachers showed up.

In other words, the *Reading Reform Foundation* wasn't out a penny and neither was the *Kiwanis Club*. Then I started doing Workshops for teachers on the side — 3 to 5 workshops a year — and it was very gratifying.

The word got out, probably due to the *Reading Reform Foundation*, and Bob Sweet, who is now in the White House, was then acting director at the *National Institute of Education* and he asked me to come back and direct the research on beginning or elementary reading. There were some changes in the department so I wasn't able to do much in that area in the short time that I was in what was called the *Teaching and Learning Division*.

However, I was transferred to the *Dissemination Improvement and Practice Program* within the Institute and in that capacity I was able to manage the *National Adult Literacy* project which is the research component of the *President's Adult Literacy Initiative*, and I can assure you — I have some figures here — that everything the *Reading Reform Foundation* has stood for and has been fighting for its 24-year history is absolutely needed. It is supported by every piece of research. I'll give you just two examples from the *National Adult Literacy Project*.

You are all familiar with the Federally fund program, *Adult Basic Education*. *Adult Basic Education* serves three populations. The basic skills group is about a third of the people they serve — about 2,000,000 in, adult basic education (and by the way, that third can't read at all, or no more than a 3.9 grade level). These are adults we are talking about. The second group called *Secondary Skills*, or *Secondary Education Group*. They are people who are reading at least the fourth grade to maybe the seventh eighth grade level and they are working generally on a GED which is the equivalency of a high school diploma. The third group, which won't of too much interest to you, is the ESL, English as a second language group.

The first group cannot read at all or at a 3.9 grade and has had, at a minimum, 7 to 9 years public schooling, and some had more. To get into a Junior College or Community College, as far I know, you have to have a High School diploma or a GED— I'm not positive, but I think you do. Of those enrolling in our Community or Junior Colleges in the study that was done, more than percent were in remedial reading, writing and arithmetic. It would seem to me we have a problem.

The best figures we now have: we have 27 million functional illiterates, and another 45 million who are marginally literate.

I don't know how you can be functionally literate but that's the term that they use. They use a lot of interesting terms here. In Washington we talk about "higher order cognitive skills." Back in Idaho, we call "thinking." It took me a little while to get used the language here.

Anyway, we have 27 million adult illiterates and the question I ask is, where do they come from when we have 10 years of compulsory education, at least up to the age of 16, in a country that is spending, as of 1982-83, 116 billion dollars more than any other country in the world on education — where are they coming from? They are coming from our schools.

Illiteracy in Japan, according to the latest figures we have, is less than one percent. "Studies done earlier by the *Council for Basic Education*, illiteracy runs from ½ of 1 percent in Sweden to no more than 2 ½ percent in central Europe and Russia. It is interesting to note that in Russia and in the Communist bloc countries, they are using and

always have used, a direct intensive systematic phonics approach to teaching reading while this country, Canada, and Australia – in other words the Western nations – use a method that is **designed to create psychological or neurological blocks**.

Many children do learn to read because they figure out the code on their own or they have uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, or someone else who teaches them the code. I was certainly an example of that.

I started public school in 1939, got to the second grade and couldn't read a word. It could have been Chinese or Greek upon the board. My father taught me to read. His mother tongue was German, his phonics was very crude, but when Dad said "Frog," you jumped!

Once I found out that these letters and letter combinations had sounds and that I could blend those sounds into words that had meaning, I was on my way. This is something that many children, as you all know, have been denied. *The National Commission on Excellence in Education*, which came out with *A Nation at Risk*, indicated that, of 17-year-olds in the nation, 13 percent are functionally illiterate. They cannot read road maps, take a driver's license test, read the instructions on a medicine bottle, or fill out a job application form. And, as many as 40 percent of the minorities are functionally illiterate. There are three times as many functional illiterates among the Hispanics as there are among whites. Of the Hispanics, 40 percent never reach the 10th grade. The dropout rate, by the way, is 800,000 to 1 million a year. If you add to that the adults with the refugees and immigrants, our illiterate population increasing by 2.3 million every year. I think we have a tremendous problem.

I won't even get into the figures of what it costs us economically, but I can mention a few items. A report in 1972 said 273 billion dollars is lost in unrealized income, of which 71 billion (if these people were employed) would go into the national treasury and 24 billion would go into local and state treasuries. It is figures like this that are really staggering. More than six billion dollars is paid out in unemployment compensation. Much of that is because people can't read and hold down jobs that require reading.

I'm not suggesting that what we are doing here at the *Reading Reform Foundation* is going to send everyone to college — that's not the point. The point is that our schools ought to be able to graduate 95 to 97 percent of people who have been in school 6 to 8 years as functionally literate.

I think very few Americans think of reading as a political problem, but the problem is absolutely political. You think of schooling, children, teachers, and parents — you don't think politics. But the problem is political because what we have basically in the United States are government schools — state-controlled government schools, state accredited. The teachers are certified by the state. We like to think we have local schools because we have local boards. Boards are administrative units of the state, and the amount of power and authority they have will vary from state to state; but that does not remove the fact that they are simply administrative units of the state government. So, we really should talk about state schools.

Reading people don't want to see any changes. Why should they? There is more money to be made in illiteracy than there is in literacy. **A teacher who is well trained in phonics needs chalk, blackboard, paper, and pencil.**

Teachers are receiving across the United States, a great deal of criticism and are being blamed for not teaching children to read. And yes, there are the ones who are responsible. But they are victims just as much as the children are inadvertently victimized by them.

The teachers cannot teach what they don't know. I gave in-service training to more than 400 teachers in a six-year time period, and I learned that it didn't matter where the teachers came from, the colleges and universities in Idaho or the states contiguous to Idaho, or in the Midwest – they knew nothing about phonics. I'll give you just one example, I never had one teacher in 400 tell me why, in the English dictionaries, words are divided into syllables. Anyone who did raise their hand, said, "so we would know how to divide a word at the end of a line," not the fact that it is basically the way we know whether the vowels are long or short.

There are two articles, that would be of interest to you, in the *Reading World*, by Alfred Mazurkiewicz. The first one he did was "What Teachers Know about Phonics." Just let me sum it up. He interviewed about 300 teachers in 22 school districts, and he found out basically that they did not know much about phonics. So, thank God, he did the next logical thing he should have done, "What the Professors Don't Know about Phonics Can Hurt."

Based on the results of this study (and this was on 225 professors – 61.7 percent held a PhD or an EdD, some 30 plus percent held Masters and I think 3 or 4 percent held Bachelor's degree) and within its limitations, the conclusion is inescapable that college professors who teach teachers of beginning reading do not agree on what reading terms should be taught, the definitions, or the generalizations to be used in phonics analysis. The implication is clear that teachers of reading are inadequately prepared and, as a consequence, teach children with far less than a good understanding of principles involved in phonics and word analysis – and nothing's changed.

Thank you.



Michael Brunner addressing the General Assembly  
Note the eminent scholar and redound pedagogue  
Samuel L. Blumenfeld on the front row.

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

December 31, 2008

I wish I could say that a lot has changed for the better since Mr. Brunner delivered this address at the 1985 *Reading Reform Foundation* in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Unfortunately, my many tutoring students seem to have received very little phonics instruction and no systematic handwriting or spelling instruction.

I hope the publishers will contact the right people who understand phonics-first and how it is best taught. I notice that my mentor, the late Samuel L. Blumenfeld is setting on the front row, on the far left facing the front. Mr. Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* could have single-handed solved the illiteracy problem in America.

If Mr. Brunner's remarks concerning college professors is still true, the publishers will be wise to examine some of the older basal phonics programs such as the 1963 *Basic Reading* by Walcutt and McCracken, *Open Court* by Priscilla McQueen, or Economy's *Phonetic Keys to Reading*. My children learned to read with the last two.

Google Book is making available an enormous number of older reading programs such as *The New Beacon Primer* by James S. Fassett and *Synthetic Phonics* by Rebecca Pollard, to name just two.

For a simple, yet highly effective, solution to illiteracy visit my website:

[www.blendphonics.org](http://www.blendphonics.org)

My personal website is:

[www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net).

Mott Media ([www.MottMedia.com](http://www.MottMedia.com)) has published Mr. Brunner's phonics program, *Phonics Made Plain*. You can order his research study, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential* from [www.halcyon.org](http://www.halcyon.org).

I edited Brunner's video, "The Retarding America, The Imprisonment of Potential" in 2010 for publication on YouTube. In July of 2019, I published the uncut video in high definition on my YouTube Channel. The video was produced in 1993.

<https://youtu.be/c-q79JTOE0s>

Here is a link to Brunner's 1993 article for the Department of Justice: "Reduced Recidivism and Increased Employment Opportunity through Research-Based Reading Instruction." This became the basic for his book, *The Retarding of America: Imprisonment of Potential*."

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED361646.pdf>

Here is a link to the Archive Copy of Brunner's old website.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170102125945/http://www.literacyalert.org/>

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