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Faith Borkowsky: Failing Schools? Failing Teachers? Failing Instruction? Failing Parents?

*Jul 15, 2018 by
Michael F. Shaughnessy EducationViews Senior
Columnist*

An Interview with Faith Borkowsky: Failing Schools? Failing Teachers? Failing Instruction? Failing Parents?

Michael F. Shaughnessy –

1) Faith, first of all, tell us about yourself- your education and experience.

As a graduate of Brooklyn College, part of the CUNY college system, I obtained degrees in elementary and special education, a master's degree in reading, and advanced certification as a school district administrator. I greatly appreciate and value the opportunities my education has afforded me and always had a desire to give back by supporting effective teaching practices.

For over thirty years, I have worked in diverse communities in New York City and on Long Island as a classroom teacher, reading/learning specialist, regional reading coach, private tutor, and as an administrator for grant-funded literacy initiatives. I am a Certified Wilson and IDA Dyslexia Practitioner, Orton-Gillingham trained, and I have extensive training and experience in a number of other research-based, peer-reviewed programs that have produced positive gains for students with Dyslexia, Auditory Processing Disorder, ADD/ADHD, and a host of learning difficulties.

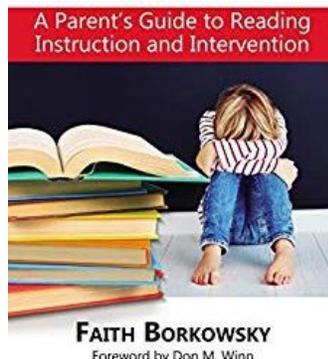
Presently, I have my own reading and writing clinic, High Five Literacy and Academic Coaching, and I frequently give presentations on literacy topics for parents, teachers, and administrators.

2) Now on to your latest book – " Failing Students or Failing Schools?" What brought this about? Why did you decide to write it?

My experience working with children of all ages, including English language learners and students with special needs, has given me a broad theoretical and practical understanding of the skills and knowledge students need to be successful in the upper grades, and to ultimately be ready for college and beyond. I have presented numerous workshops and model lessons and have frequently been asked to support teachers and administrators by providing professional development and technical assistance. In that role, I observed and conferred with

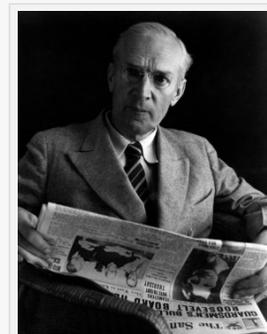
FAILING STUDENTS OR FAILING SCHOOLS?

A Parent's Guide to Reading Instruction and Intervention



FAITH BORKOWSKY
Foreword by Don M. Winn

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teachers concerning their craft and assisted them in interpreting data to promote student achievement. Most teachers are in their own silos, not knowing what goes on beyond the walls of their own classrooms.

And, certainly, parents really have no idea what goes on behind school walls and trust that the teachers and administrators will support their children's learning. In these various roles, I have seen programs come and go, materials bought by school districts not used properly by teachers, or, even worse, never touched. The waste and lack of clear direction has been disheartening, yet I have also seen first-hand what truly works. I wanted to share what I have learned about reading instruction and intervention in a non-threatening, accessible way, and to encourage both parents and interested educators to get involved to effect change.

3) You will see that I added "Failing Instruction and Failing Parents" above- Is it that teachers do not know the proper instructional techniques to work with struggling readers or is it a lack of support at home?

To start, higher education, for the most part, has not kept up with the latest research that supports an explicit approach to teaching phonics. One would think that universities would value the most up-to-date, evidence-based teaching methods, but, sadly, that is not the case. Pre-service teachers are taught reading strategies that have not been effective and continue to teach in this style when entering the school system. Administrators enforce these unproven strategies and evaluate teachers based on these antiquated criteria. Even schools that receive professional development in explicit, systematic phonics continue to promote faulty teaching methods and, at best, try to combine theories to produce what is euphemistically called a "balanced" approach. Unfortunately, this is not the answer.

As far as your question regarding "failing parents," I am sure there are parents ill-equipped to handle the challenges of parenthood, but I do feel parents try to do their best for their children and are hungry for information.

4) I suspect that it is politically incorrect to suggest that mainstreaming and inclusion takes a gargantuan amount of time from providing quality instruction to struggling readers- your thoughts?

The discussion surrounding inclusion vs. self-contained special education classes is highly contentious. Rather than discussing the pros and cons of these educational settings, I choose to focus on the type of instruction that benefits ALL children. Explicit, structured literacy is necessary for all struggling readers and will hurt no one.

There is really no reason that any child should have to suffer for years, never learning how to read or write adequately. Teacher training in effective, evidence-based reading strategies and programs that work would reduce the number of children in special education programs, whether or not the setting is inclusion or self-contained.

5) We all know that reading is complex – What do you see as the biggest challenges?

Yes, reading is complex, but everyone can learn if taught correctly. One of the major challenges we face is the myth that a reading comprehension problem can be fixed with lots of reading comprehension strategies. There are always underlying skill deficits that need to be addressed. If the real problem is phonics decoding, then "there is no comprehension strategy powerful enough to compensate for the fact you can't read the words," a quote from Anita Archer. The other major challenge is children's early speech and language deficits impact reading development.

Right from the start, the children who enter school with weak vocabulary and language are at a disadvantage when they learn to read. The challenge is catching children early enough and recognizing that they will need support in one of these major areas (language development and decoding) or both to be successful readers.

6) Reading fluency or reading comprehension- which is more important?

Fluency is directly correlated to reading comprehension. I don't think they are mutually exclusive. If reading is slow and labored, it will be difficult for children to understand what they are reading. If they read too quickly and treat reading as a race to the finish line, comprehension will be compromised.

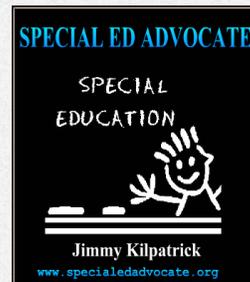
7) Now, word attack, or vocabulary- which is more important?

As I stated earlier, both word attack and vocabulary are necessary for proficient reading. One without the other will not be adequate. I would say that robust, early language development and the ability to lift words off the page are equally important.

8) Getting the right book into a child's hands is so critically important- but are teachers trained to put a western, or science fiction or some other classic text (Dumas) or perhaps one of the Harry Potter books?



Dr. Martin Haberman
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Getting the right book into a child's hands is critically important to keep the child reading throughout his or her lifetime. We all want children to connect to books and love to read. I feel strongly, however, that our priority should be to get them reading, period! There is nothing motivating about reading if it is too difficult. We are putting the cart before the horse. As a society, let's ensure that our children can all read, and then we can introduce them to great literary masterpieces.

9) What have I neglected to ask?

My hope is that *Failing Students or Failing Schools? A Parent's Guide to Reading Instruction and Intervention* will be read by school board members, professors, district administrators, and politicians, in addition to parents and classroom teachers. We need the decision-makers to get on board and begin putting children first. Based upon the feedback I've received thus far, I am confident that my book can be the beginning of an honest conversation if we truly want to make a difference.



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Excellent interview!
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