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My name is Lynn Burke and I am a career educator at the primary/elementary school level. It is with renewed hope and optimism that I address the New York Education Reform Commission.

Not terribly long ago, you could live a successful life with or without being able to read and write. Today, it is difficult to live independently and nearly impossible to thrive without being able to read. Reading is THE essential prerequisite for all other learning.

Difficulty learning to read dampens and eventually crushes the excitement and love for learning that most children have when they enter school. A student's reading level in first grade is an excellent predictor of his/her reading level in high school. By fourth grade, approximately 38% of our students read below grade level. Once poor readers enter middle school, they often, in fact, usually receive little or no instruction in "how to read." Combine that with the fact that older poor readers avoid reading because it is taxing, slow, and extremely frustrating. The result? Their lack of reading experience results in inadequate development/knowledge of vocabulary, spelling conventions, sentence structure, text organization, concepts of academic "book" language. Over time, comprehension skills and writing skills decline and/or fail to develop.

Once children fall behind in reading, they seldom catch up. Reading failure starts early, takes root quickly, and affects students for life. The National Institute for Child and Human Health and Development (NICHD) considers reading failure to be a national public health concern. Why is it that, despite having spent untold millions of dollars and having expended countless man-hours of energy, we have not been able to improve the literacy rate in New York State? With all due respect, the answer, at least in part, may lie in Albert Einstein's declaration that, "Continuing to do what you've been doing and expecting a different outcome is the definition of insanity."

Fortunately, our stagnancy (and in some areas, our decline) in educational achievement has been accompanied by something positive. We have amassed a large body of science-based research-backed information about learning to read and have achieved consensus among the majority of researchers and involved educators as to HOW children learn to read.

Reading is probably the most complex skill set a person ever learns. But, the learning of 26 letters and 44 sounds is manageable. When you add to that the fact that our alphabetic code is reversible, instructional implications become evident. It means that whatever someone learns to read, they should also learn to spell.

Currently, for no scientifically based reason of which I am aware, we teach spelling as a visual memory task. Instead, spelling is better taught as the encoding of speech sounds, just as reading is the decoding of speech sounds. In other words, reading involves mastering the knowledge of sound/symbol or phoneme/grapheme correspondence. Words are made up of individual sounds; and sounds are represented by letters.

Sounds are auditory and letters are visual. How does the kinesthetic element fit into this process? Handwriting, a skill that is currently "out of vogue," is intended to be the neurological integrating force in this learning process. Handwriting DOES matter; therefore, it is important that we begin telling pre-service teachers WHY it matters and HOW to teach it.

Few teachers working today are aware of the fact that there are six syllable types in our language. It is the syllable type that determines the sound a vowel represents in a given word. But, if few teachers know that critical fact, how can students be taught that critical element of both reading and writing?

The recognition of letter patterns (orthography) as they represent sounds must be rapid/automatic. With speed and accuracy, reading becomes fluent; and only THEN can the reader be held responsible for comprehension.

In summary, research has confirmed that effective reading instruction at any age and in any alphabetic language must include these five essential elements:

- Phonological Processing
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

That is best accomplished by utilizing a multisensory structured approach to language arts instruction. Multisensory instruction

involves the simultaneous utilization of all pathways in the brain: visual, auditory, tactile/kinesthetic, thereby increasing the likelihood of both information reception and retention. The instructional sequence must begin with the easiest and most basic elements of language and progress methodically to more difficult material. Each successive step must be based on those already learned. Instruction is continuously diagnostic and prescriptive, meaning that the teacher must be adept at prescriptive or individualized instruction. It must be noted that this instructional approach is both analytic and synthetic, a significantly more sophisticated methodology than rote recall.

I firmly believe that the single most impactful thing that could be done to reduce the property tax burden generated by education would be to have all teachers (and, most imperatively, Preschool, Kindergarten, Primary and Elementary school teachers) trained to teach reading and writing using a multi-sensory structured phonics-based instructional approach.