

The Principal Who Banned Reading to Students

OR: The Last Thing You Want Is Kids Liking Books!

by Jim Trelease © 2010

ALL IT TAKES is one principal to undo so much good. Just one. One know-it-all. Here's how it works.

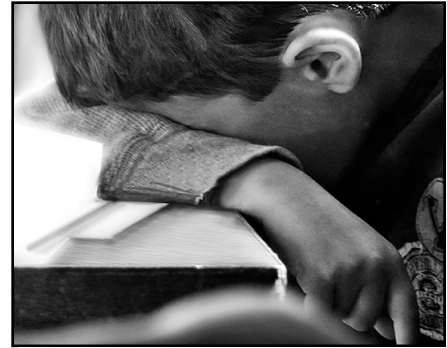
We start with two brothers growing up in a small town where their mother walked with them to the public library every two weeks, a journey of one and half miles. They took out two books, one to be read to them and one to be read by them. That was enough of a value system to produce two school librarians when they grew up, both choosing to work in their home town.

The one one in question here, let's call him Jack (after all, he's eventually going to meet an angry "giant"), applied his mother's lessons to his own children. They were read to and immersed in a world of print. His oldest, upon graduating from one of America's most prestigious universities, was asked how a kid from a small town could make in such a big-time place. "Daddy—you read to me every night."

That nightly tradition was carried on with the second child, a first-place winner in two national writing competitions while in high school. Her college application essay was on the 3,218 consecutive nights in which her father read to her as a child.

The lesson plan of home also was applied to Jack's K-2 school library where he'd memorize six books a week for easier reading to classes. By the time they finished second grade, they'd have been exposed to hundreds and hundreds of his readings and millions of words. He did this for decades.

And then came a new assignment to a school where the principal advised Jack that all reading aloud



A beginning reader on research assignment?

should stop once children have left preschool. "Any reading aloud can be done in the home. If it's not done there, that's not my problem or yours. I want them seated at tables when they come into the library, not on story mats on the floor. They're to be seated and working on research on the computer or reading to themselves."

The librarian tried explaining the importance of reading aloud, as well as the futility of kindergartners and first-graders trying to do research on computers but to no avail. Reading aloud to that grade level was a waste of time and would stop immediately, declared the principal.

Little help could be garnered from the rest of the faculty which had been living under the principal's intimidating regimen for years. Jack's only recourses were to swallow his beliefs or appeal the principal's decree to the superintendent's office, a superintendent firmly entrenched in "research-based" education. That shouldn't be a problem, Jack thought. There's plenty of research and endorsement from the highest

reaches of education for reading to children. In 1985, the U.S. Department of Education declared it's "the single most important activity for building the knowledge for eventual success in reading" and went on to say "it's a practice that continue throughout the grades." The week of Jack's district hearing, the senior psychology lecturer and head of Williams College's teaching program had penned an essay for the op-ed page of *The New York Times* describing the *ideal* elementary classroom curriculum this way:

In this classroom, children would spend two hours each day hearing stories read aloud, reading aloud themselves, telling stories to one another and reading on their own. After all, the first step to literacy is simply being immersed, through conversation and storytelling, in a reading environment; the second is to read a lot and often. A school day where every child is given ample opportunities to read and discuss books would give teachers more time to help those students who need more instruction in order to become good readers.

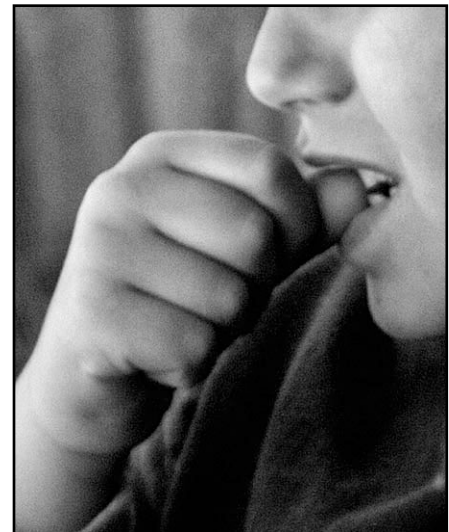
While Jack waited for the hearing and accumulated documentation to support his practices, he dared to read aloud to his students. It was a mistake. A bad one, according to the principal, who issued a Letter of Reprimand for reading to first-graders — twice!

Finally there arrived the hearing with the assistant superintendent and director of curriculum. It couldn't have gone smoother, Jack thought. They agreed with the research he presented and supported his philosophy. A week later their letter arrived negating much of what they had agreed with earlier. Their finding was that reading aloud be no more than 5-10 minutes a class and the rest

of the time was to be spent by the students doing "research that would be based on the theme of the story."

One faculty member noted with a wince, "Many of these children are beginning readers who can only read a few words — words like "I," "a," "and," "is," and "the." To which another teacher replied, "A lot of research has been done using those five words but not *just* those five words."

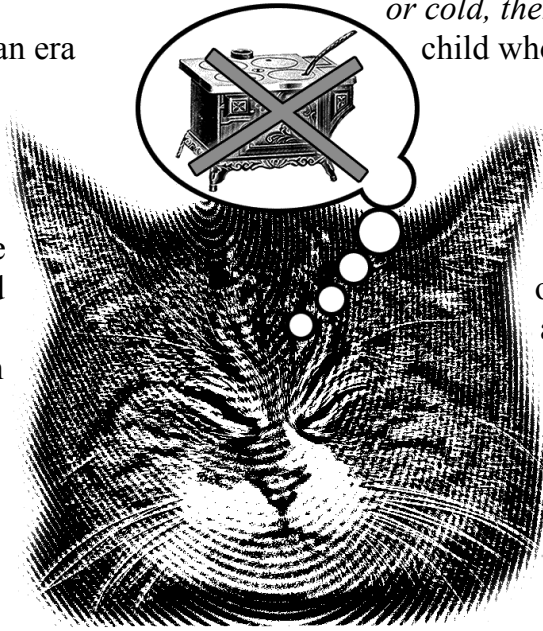
Soon thereafter, Jack the librarian took a medical leave — using some of the more than 400 days he had accumulated through decades of service. Ironically, these events materialized one year after the local paper named him "Educator of the Year."



All of which reminds me of the time a decade ago when the superintendent of a large Southern urban school district declared he wanted no more recess, that elementary recess time could be better used with students at their desks, on task, learning, and raising their scores. And just to make sure those lazy teachers didn't try to sneak in the recess, he and the school board made sure new school construction didn't include playgrounds. What came of it all? The scores never rose but the superintendent did — he went on to another large district and

then into consultant work, leaving behind the results of his “insightful” leadership.

Strange as it may seem in an era when brain research has taught us so much about how children learn, there are still educators who think the medicine can’t be any good if it doesn’t scald the throat going down. They’d surely benefit from a dose of Mark Twain’s wisdom: *The cat that sits*



on a hot stove lid never sits on another hot stove lid; in fact, it avoids all stove lids, hot or cold, thereafter. And sadly, the

child who never associates school and reading with pleasure and a love of learning will avoid everything to do with school and reading thereafter — the very opposite of what school and Jack the librarian — and his mother — were trying to accomplish.