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K-12: Meet Sue Dickson, a Hero of American Literacy

By [Bruce Deitrick Price](#)

Sue Dickson is best known as the creator of *Sing, Spell, Read, and Write*, one of the most popular phonics programs.

Now in her 80s, she is still active as ever, pushing phonics however possible and refining a new approach.

The ups and downs in her career tell us a lot about the sad state of American education. In her college's pre-teacher program, she was taught nothing about phonics. Not only that, but when she started to teach first grade, her superiors constantly emphasized their verdict that phonics is useless and even dangerous.

Sue Dickson recalls: "I was told that phonics doesn't work, that the English language is too complicated to be taught that way. I accepted that reasoning hook, line, and sinker. So, during my first two years as a teacher, I didn't use any phonics even though I had lots of kids in trouble."

But in 1955, her mother bought a book by Rudolf Flesch called [Why Johnny Can't Read](#). Dickson recalls, "At first I rejected his recommendations. After all,

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I was the one with the teaching degree. But my mother wouldn't stop. She followed me around the house reading from that book!"



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"Finally, I decided I had to do something because I was losing whole groups of students through the cracks. I would give phonics a try. There was considerable apprehension, as my administrators were adamantly against it. They put a three-page memo in every teacher's mailbox warning us to stay away from phonics!"

Then came the big shock. Her class scored so high on the standardized test that these same administrators seemed about to accuse her of cheating. Instead, they offered her a summer job teaching reading to students who were at least three years below the national norm. She never went back to teaching "look and say." She knew that phonics was the answer for all students.

More than that, she started work on her own system. She wanted to integrate the principles of phonics with music and movement. This was a natural goal because, in college, she had minored in music education. She believed that learning to read could be fun and physical. Her program requires that students jump up, move around, and sing phonics songs. School was suddenly lively.

Over the next 30 years Dickson perfected [*Sing, Spell, Read, and Write*](#). By then, it was used all over the country. One Mississippi school system found in 1988 that first-graders improved their reading performance by 42 percentile points on the Stanford Achievement Test. Reading comprehension improved 34 percentile points, and spelling went up 30 points.

In 1986, the Selma (Calif.) Enterprise reported that *Sing, Spell, Read, and Write* is "an educational phenomenon" for its power at teaching Spanish-

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speaking students to read.

Arguably, K-12 reading has been a disaster for 85 years, and this short biography tells you why. The school system at every level was opposed to the best way to teach reading. Talk about comically incompetent. All the stuff that the professional educators claim to know was basically less than zero. [Memorizing sight-words](#) is a bad way to proceed. Children rarely learn to read fluently; additionally, they are harmed by the whole process.

If you Google Sue Dickson, you will find something surprising. She is labeled a "musical artist." That's because she has written many "[songs that teach](#)," such as the "Presidents Song," the "Inventors and Inventions Song," and varied titles such as "Counting to 100," "Mr. Nine," "Counting Backwards," and 25 more.

Her newest venture is called [Winning Reading Boost](#), developed in cooperation with the University of Florida's Lastinger Center, where it was shown to teach both non-readers and troubled readers, even in poverty-area schools, to read fluently in 90 hours!

An official at the Lastinger Center acknowledged: "In the state of Florida we know that large numbers of students – in some schools, 30, 40, 50 or even 80% – are not learning to read and are failing the state assessment." That is, sometimes only 20% actually learn to read, a shameful statistic.

QED: Every smart teacher in America has to work twice as hard because the Education Establishment is so bizarrely prejudiced against what works best.

Ever since 1931, America had been on a two-tier system. The lucky kids learn to read with phonics. The unlucky kids, the great majority, learn various non-phonetic methods and stay [illiterate, to one degree or another](#). It's a big scam and should be recognized as a preposterous and unnecessary national scandal.

Another official in Florida conceded that fourth-grade boys, unable to read, are often embarrassed and belligerent and will start fights so they don't have to reveal their inability. Sue Dickson beautifully sums up all the literacy nonsense: "It's amazing how much their personalities and behavior improve when they can read!"

The message is clear, she insists: "Teach intensive, systematic phonics! In only four or five months, our kids are reading."

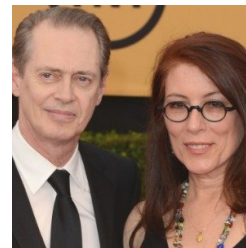
Unexpectedly, The New York Times [recently agreed](#). After more than a half-century of looking the other way, the Times has effectively announced: Sue Dickson and others on the phonics side were right all along. Excellent. Now everyone can learn to read.

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Bruce Deitrick Price's new book is [Saving K-12: What happened to our public schools? How do we fix them?](#) He deconstructs educational theories and methods at [Improve-Education.org](#).

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