

Presentation to the Fresno Unified School Board

By Nancy Lynn Barth

Good Evening, President O'Hare, Superintendent Wood, and Board Members:

I am a special education teacher for Fresno Unified. I have a master's degree and four teaching credentials. I am in the process of obtaining my Reading Specialist Certificate from Fresno Pacific University. In fact, this language arts adoption is so important to me that I left my Linguistics class early to be here.

I would like to express my support for the vote by the teachers of FUSD for Houghton Mifflin, by a school margin of 59-2. My understanding is that it has been adopted by at least 70 out of 75 school districts so far in California.

When I researched the two proposed programs, Houghton Mifflin was the only one which had as consultants an author of the California Language Arts Frameworks and a member of the National Reading Panel. Houghton Mifflin clearly meets the standards of our district/state, as well as the Reading First Guidance under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Contrary to information distributed by the publishers of Open Court, students in schools that adopted Open Court previously have not shown significant or consistent gains on the SAT-9 tests of reading. Furthermore, in an email communication Joanne Yatvin, a member of the National Reading Panel, said the panel did not consider "case studies to be 'reliable, replicable' research, and did not include any in its reviews." She asks, "Why, then, should anyone accept the Open Court case studies?"

Why indeed? The information about the use of Open Court in schools did not follow the scientifically-based formula of the NRP because they didn't use control groups. The information describes what happened in individual schools. While a quantity of data is provided, it is not "reliable, replicable" research.

The district's own Language Arts Design Proposal asked for a program that integrates content area reading into the reading block. This was considered a strength of the Houghton Mifflin program, by Fresno Unified in the comparison of the two programs.

The district proposal also stated that there should be staff "buy-in" for whatever program is adopted. With 1,639 out of 1,861 teachers at 59 out of 61 schools supporting Houghton Mifflin, that buy-in is there. During the publisher's presentation, the representative stated that, "We come free as long as you have the adoption; you will get professional staff development; we will come in and work with whoever you ask us to work with." There is on-line support for parents and teachers through Houghton Mifflin's website.

The Lexia phonics program was developed originally for use with special education students. Houghton Mifflin's focus on leveled books, guided reading groups, small group instruction, and on-going assessment will more easily support students with special needs, whether they are included, or are in other types of classes. Houghton Mifflin will also allow smoother implementation of Individual Education Plans. Open Court doesn't allow time for this.

Many district schools already incorporate Accelerated Reader into their language arts program. This is affiliated with Houghton Mifflin, and should save the district money in terms of buying supplemental trade books to support the adoption.

The needs of English Language Learners are systematically and explicitly addressed by Houghton Mifflin and their material is connected to the core. The bilingual program is in its fourth generation and is a seamless parallel to the English version in skills and themes, according to the publisher's representative. Open Court treats children learning English in a "sink or swim" manner.

The district Language Arts Design Proposal also said that there should be lots of books in the classroom, vocabulary should be developed in context, assessment should be authentic and purposeful and the program should be able to be site-specific. Houghton Mifflin meets these guidelines. Open Court does not.

Finally, if the district would like students to be able to successfully compete with others, we need to develop critical thinkers, readers, and writers. Teachers are more likely to be able to facilitate this development in their students with the adoption of Houghton Mifflin.

Thank you.
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