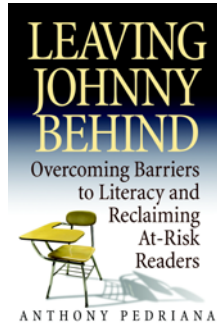


## Book review for

### *Leaving Johnny Behind: Overcoming Barriers to Literacy and Reclaiming At-Risk Readers*

by Anthony Pedriana



#### **For Immediate Release:**

In 1955, Rudolph Flesch shocked the nation with his best seller, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In it he chastised the reading community for promoting methods that produced heretofore unknown patterns of reading failure. Flesch's tirade rekindled the reading wars and spawned a research movement designed to resolve the issue once and for all.

With *Leaving Johnny Behind*, Pedriana continues in that same tradition by pointing out that in the five decades since Flesch, the reading establishment continues to turn its collective back on scientifically based reading practices. Instead, he maintains, we continue to engage in an endless interfusion of innovations, modifications and gimmicks while two-thirds of American 4<sup>th</sup> graders read below proficient levels and an achievement gap of some 30 percentage points separates minority children from their white counterparts.

What Pedriana finds most alarming is the commonly held view among holistic practitioners that learning to read is a natural process, and that given enough encouragement, children will learn to read just as easily as they learned to speak. Pedriana argues that this notion has an insidious effect on Johnny's literacy advancement, because it undermines the role of directed teaching and cultivation of a work ethic needed to master essential skills. Such habits, he maintains, can be nurtured without destroying Johnny's motivation, or ruining his esteem.

In a chapter entitled "Through Johnny's Eyes," Pedriana chronicles in heart-breaking detail the impact of Johnny's inability meet grade level expectations. Johnny is more inclined to develop aggressive and defiant behavior as a coping mechanism, and more likely to drop out once he realizes he cannot begin to understand the ever more sophisticated material in his school textbooks. As a consequence, his prospects for

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gainful employment are dramatically reduced and he is exponentially more likely to join the ranks of the adjudicated.

Unlike Flesch, however, who stressed the differences between phonics and holistic practitioners, Pedriana seeks common ground. He notes that there is plenty in the data for both sides to love, and failing to take advantage of that common ground is to mock our high-minded expressions of “children first.” That is, perhaps what makes *Leaving Johnny Behind* something special - its emphasis on the positive, and its attempt to build coalitions among reading practitioners instead of ripping the scabs off old wounds. In so doing, Pedriana advocates for a cohesive reading policy to guide instruction at the national, state and district levels, and one that will guarantee Johnny’s literacy future no matter what school he attends or where his life circumstance might take him.

While the book is of special interest to educators and home-schoolers, it has broader appeal as well, especially among those who are dissatisfied with their children’s literacy progress and those who are alarmed at America’s declining status as a world power.