TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

All's Well That Spells Well

Practical Perspective and Simple Suggestions for the Teaching of Spelling

by
Steve Peha

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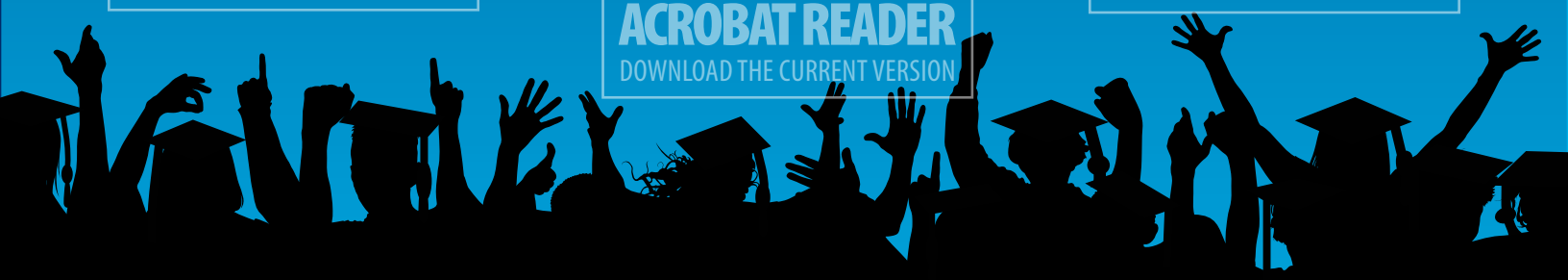

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by Steve Peha

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I do a lot of driving, sometimes as much as 3000 miles in a month, and I don't like it one bit. Aside from being unproductive time that I can ill-afford to waste, it is boring. And when traffic is bad or my typical work day of guest teaching, consulting, and presenting is wending wearily into its 16th or 17th hour, stalking the blacktop of I-whatever-it-is seems to me downright tedious and uncomfortable. But it is merely an occupational hazard, an unfortunate consequence of the wonderful career I feel most fortunate to have happened into, and so, recognizing that the roadbound reality of my work is likely never to change, I've learned to make the best of it. One of the ways I do that is by listening to the radio, and what I like to listen to most of all is National Public Radio's twice daily news program *All Things Considered.*

Sure, NPR has good news coverage, but what I like best are the essays, commentaries, and reviews. The book reviews are probably the most entertaining for me, and my favorite reviewer is… Well, that's just it, you see, I've heard this guy's name for months now—he's a university professor who's fairly well regarded in the lit. crit. circles, and he writes with a wonderful combination of academic insight and everyday language—but I've never seen his name in print and so I don't know how to spell it.

Now what am I going to do?

I'm going to start by taking a guess. His first name is easy, it's Alan. His last name sounds exactly like the word "choose", but I don't think that's how he spells it. Why don't I think that? I just don't ever recall seeing that spelling in a surname anywhere. So what other choices do I have? Chews? How about Chuse? Or Chuise? Or Chooze? All possible, I suppose. Or maybe Chius? Ah, forget it. But at least I got the first name right. Or did I? Now that I think of it there are two common forms of that name: Alan and Allen; and I even new a guy once named Alen. (I suppose there's probably even an "Allan" out there somewhere, too.) Now what? Well, I'll just go with my best guess: this reviewer's name is Alan Chews.

Now, because I want to get it right, I'll try to verify my choice. But how? I can't look it up in a dictionary. I know, I'll hop onto NPR's web site and track it down from there…

[A couple of minutes later.]

Got it: Alan Cheuse. (While I was thinking of brews, cruise, and booze, I should have been thinking masseuse or chanteuse. But then if I'd thought his name might be of French origin that would have opened up the possibility that his first name might have been "Allain." Or is it "Alain?") I was wrong about the last name, but at least I got the first name right.

So why did I take you through this little episode? Well, this is what happens to little kids when they write—about every third word. So, how did I handle myself? First, I took some guesses. I knew several common forms of his first name (because I had seen them before in print), so I just chose one. Then, I sounded out his last name. The initial sound was easy. But the final sound was not. I threw out "oose" right away. That just seemed too unusual. But "ews", "ooze", and "uise" all came from ideas I had about other words I know that have the same ending sound. The letter pattern "ius" is very unusual, but I remembered the Chinese name "Chiu" and thought it might be possible. Probably not very likely though as it would involve tacking on the English plural to a Chinese name. Fi-

nally, I just took a guess based on what I thought was most likely (and what would communicate most readily with my audience if I couldn't find the correct spelling). And then I looked it up in a reference source.

So what does all this say about the process human beings go through to spell words?

What We Know About Spelling Words We Don't Know

- **Spelling relies heavily on visual memory.** I didn't know how to spell the reviewer's name because I had never seen it in print. Even though I am an excellent speller with good ability to sound things out and many different strategies for spelling unknown words, I still couldn't get it right the first time because I hadn't ever seen it.
- **Spelling words we are unfamiliar with involves guessing, which involves inventing possible spellings.** If I had not made guesses as to his name I wouldn't have been able to put anything down for you to read (in the event that I couldn't look up the correct spelling), nor would I have been able to use the "Search" function on NPR's web site to find the correct spelling (the ability to invent spellings is helpful for using most word resources, but it is usually required for using electronic resources which cannot be paged through at random).
- **Inventing spellings involves multiple techniques.** I sounded out the beginning, used auditory memory to associate the final sound with the final sounds of several words I knew, then used visual memory to "tack on" the ends of those words to the initial "ch" sound. Along the way I also attempted to use my knowledge of English and Chinese sir names. I feel dumb now not to have picked up on the French angle. After all, I studied French for years in school.
- **Choosing from a variety of invented options involves making educated guesses based on the writer's knowledge of likely spelling patterns.** Not every option I generated seemed equally likely to be correct; some just seemed weird to me because of my intuition about similar sounding names I had seen in the past. Once again, my knowledge of the English language told me that some patterns were less likely than others.
- **Editing gives us a chance to check the spellings of words we are unsure of.** I knew that I could write down my best guess and come back to fix it later.
- **To find the spellings of unusual words we can use a variety of resources.** Dictionaries and spell checkers are not the only places to locate the spellings of words.

The other strategy I could have used, had I not been sitting alone in my office at the time, would have been to ask someone. But other than that, I ran through all the likely ways of getting the job done, and finally resorted to some relatively recent technology to pull it off. The moral of the story is this: if this is how students are going to learn to spell when they're adults, why don't we give them a head start while they're still students? Would it have helped me to have memorized a list of words selected by a publisher who didn't know what I was writing about? No. Does it help students? Research and common sense also say no. So why is this the main way students are taught to spell in this country?[1]

[1] If, after reading this document, you're still sold on the value of weekly spelling lists from spelling books consider this: today's college-bound high school graduate has a vocabulary of approximately 60,000 words. Even if we speculate that these students can spell only one third of these words correctly, that's 20,000 words. Now, if we gave out 20 spelling words to our students each week from the first day they entered kindergarten to the day they got their diplo-

OK, Let's Get Started!

I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that this document is based on a relatively small amount of professional literature, so small, in fact, that you could read it yourself in probably 6-8 hours. At the 1997 International Reading Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, I had the extreme good fortune to spend significant amounts of time talking with two of the best spelling experts in the world: Richard Gentry and Diane Snowball. As a result, I resolved then and there to nail down my knowledge of the spelling issue once and for all. It didn't take much nailing. I bought three of Mr. Gentry's books and two of Ms. Snowball's, and sat down and read them over two days. The books are concise and clearly written. As a group they provide a complete look at what spelling is and how it should be taught. I would encourage you to read any of them.

Now for the bad news. The content of these five books, while based on good common sense and solid research, and filled with many practical and easy to implement teaching ideas, stands in sharp contrast to what seems to be going on in most American classrooms. As Gentry somewhat angrily points out:

> Too much that is known about how to teach spelling isn't being put into practice. I can think of no subject we teach more poorly or harbor more myths about than spelling. In spite of volumes of research, teachers still use the same unsubstantiated teaching formulas. The spelling strategies and lessons you remember—whether you were in school one, two, or three generations ago—are still in use.… And parents may be bad spellers themselves, remembering only what school taught them—that bad spelling means bad kid.
>
> … Some of the myths about spelling actually prevent normal spelling development. Yet they are widespread. They are considered part of our conventional wisdom.
>
> Richard Gentry, Spel... is a Four-Letter Word

Mr. Gentry's frustration probably comes from the irony that spelling development and the teaching of spelling have been well understood for more than 20 years yet completely ignored by parents, teachers, and administrators. You may feel similarly frustrated yourself. After all, poor teaching of spelling is one of the most common criticisms of our educational system.

So, there's a good chance that what you read here may stand in opposition to what you do in your classroom. And I guess the reason I'm saying all this is because I know that doesn't make teachers feel very good. I also know that seeing students who can't spell, or getting trashed in the local and national media for poor spelling, doesn't make teachers feel very good either. Teaching effectively, on the other hand, makes everyone—students, parents, administrators, politicians, taxpayers, *and* teachers—feel good. And that's why I've put all this together.

Lack of ability in and poor attitudes about spelling hold students back in their development as writers. And that compromises their learning to an extraordinary degree. By changing the way you teach spelling—by using the research-proven techniques recommended by people like Richard Gentry and Diane Snowball—you can dramatically im-

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mas (20 words per week for 36 weeks per year for 13 years) and every student memorized the correct spelling of every word they were ever taught, they would only learn 9360 words—less than one sixth of the words in their vocabulary. So, even with this comprehensive approach to word memorization, an approach that goes far beyond what any child would ever receive, the majority of the words a child needed for writing would still have to be mastered by other means.

prove your students' spelling performance, which will dramatically improve your students' writing performance, which will dramatically improve your students' overall performance in virtually every subject area. So, for a relatively small investment (60-75 minutes a week according to Mr. Gentry) and perhaps a little reading (this document and maybe one of the books listed at the end), you can make a dramatic impact on your students' ability to learn.

Two Big Ideas

Though Gentry and Snowball have some minor differences in emphasis, they both weigh in again and again on two big ideas: **[1]** Spelling is for writing; and **[2]** Spelling is best learned through the acquisition and use of spelling strategies rather than through rote memorization. That spelling is used for writing may seem so obvious to you that you've never consciously considered its implications for instruction, but this idea should be the driving force behind most of your decision making, and as such it should play a major role in determining how you teach.

> Spelling is a tool for writing. The purpose of learning to spell is so that writing may become easier, more fluent, more expressive, and more easily read and understood by others. Without writing, there would be little purpose in learning to spell. Thus, the proper place for spelling instruction is within the writing program. Active daily writing, for real purposes and real audiences, is necessary for spelling development in all grades.
>
> Richard Gentry and Jean Wallace Gillet, Teaching Kids to Spell

> The only authentic purpose for students to learn how to spell words in the conventional form is to assist others to read their writing. Students would even have difficulty in re-reading their own writing if they did not develop some consistent spelling for the words they are using. Writing provides the purpose for spelling so students need to be helped with personal spelling needs for their own writing.
>
> Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton, Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource

If spelling is for writing[2] then spelling instruction should be for writing, too. This means that student-created spelling lists should be favored over those found in textbooks or created by teachers. Students need to spell the words they need to write, so those are the words we should be helping them learn. Recently, for example, a first grader I was working with wanted to write a series of stories about a family trip to California. The word "California" is not likely to appear on any 1st grade spelling lists, and neither are "Disneyland" or "Universal Studios", but without these words, this student could not write what he wanted to.

The other important implication is this: if spelling is for writing, then writing is the best way to learn to spell. To become good spellers then, students are going to have to write a lot, and that means they will have to use invented spelling.[3] During the primary

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[2] Another common misconception is that spelling is for reading. While good spellers are often good readers, the reverse is often not true. I've worked with many young students who can read early chapter books but are still in the semi-phonetic spelling stage and are inventing more than half of their spellings. This reality again points up the visual nature of spelling. These kids—kids who can read but not spell—lack the ability to visualize words. They can decode them just fine when they see them on the page, but they cannot see them in their head before writing them down.

[3] There's a misconception that at some point in their development children will stop using invented spelling. As you will note from the opening of this document, even adults have to invent some spellings in order to write what they need

years, students' abilities to spell lag so far behind their abilities to communicate that if they could not invent new spellings they simply could not write at all. So obviously, invented spelling needs to be encouraged and, oddly enough, mastered just like any other skill students will use throughout their lives. But it isn't enough just to tell students that its OK to use invented spellings, we have to tell them how as well. That's where learning about the English language and learning spelling strategies come in:

> Learning how to spell is not only memorizing words, and spelling activities should not be isolated from class and individual writing needs. A more sensible approach to the teaching of spelling is based on two main premises—learning about the written language and learning the strategies that competent spellers use.
>
> Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton, Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource

Competent spellers use a variety of strategies to spell words when they write—all of which need to be explicitly taught. For example, competent spellers use:

- Knowledge about the symbols used to represent each sound.
- Knowledge of common spelling patterns.
- Knowledge of meaning relationships between words and how meaning affects spelling (e.g., words that are derivatives, compound words, words formed by adding prefixes and suffixes, etc.)
- Knowledge about generalizations or rules that apply to many words.

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to write. As human beings we never stop inventing ways to spell words we don't know. It's just that over time the number of spellings we need to invent goes way down. The degree to which children will use invented spellings is determined by the words they are using to write. Kids who write less or who write about less complex, less unusual, or "safer" topics, generally exhibit fewer invented spellings. Those kids who stretch out need to invent more spellings to say what they need to say. When parents ask me when their children will stop using invented spelling I say this: "As soon as they know how to spell every word they will ever need to write." Another thing to consider is that the number of invented spellings will vary greatly depending on the formality of the writing. For example, in my own "finished" writing, I find about one spelling error per 1000 words. But in my e-mail messages my error rate may be as high as one out of 200. If I had an editor for my published writing, my error rate would be even lower in my finished work (but never zero). On the other hand, if I didn't proofread my e-mail, my error rate there would be much higher.

Competent spellers also have something Richard Gentry calls "spelling consciousness." That is to say that they are aware of the need to spell accurately (though not to the extent of being anxious about it) and make a conscious effort to learn about how words are spelled and to improve their own spelling—especially in final published writing. Students with good spelling consciousness:

- Attempt to spell unknown words.
- Are interested in and notice how words are spelled.
- Use memory aids to remember how words are spelled.
- Use resources such as people, dictionaries, or environmental print.
- Proofread their writing and edit it when necessary.
- Use electronic resources such as spell checkers when they are available.
- Know how to spell a body of common words without having to think about them.
- Are aware of alternative but acceptable ways of spelling some words.

Ultimately, spelling consciousness may be more important than knowledge of spelling strategies. Many spelling experts—Richard Gentry among them—believe that spellers are born and not made. Personally, in my readings about genetics and neurological development, I find it hard to believe in the so-called "spelling gene", but nonetheless there do appear to be a small number of people who have trouble spelling even as adults despite having high language capabilities and putting in quite a lot of effort. What I do believe, and what has been conclusively proven, is that spelling is more of a visual skill than a linguistic skill. It's not how we hear, say, or understand words that determines our ability to spell them, it's how we see them in our mind's eye. And it only makes sense to me that since the brain's visual systems develop much earlier than its language systems, children who aren't exposed to letters and other visual stimuli very early in life may not develop sufficient abilities to discriminate between complex shapes and to visualize those shapes when they are not actually present. But regardless of how well or poorly students can visualize words when they enter school, all students can be taught spelling consciousness and can thereby become competent spellers.

What to Teach First

One of the comforting things about using a spelling book is that everything is laid out for you in order—page one today, page two tomorrow, etc. And while that certainly makes teaching easy it doesn't make it very effective because no two students in your class need to learn exactly the same things at exactly the same time in exactly the same order. But if we throw out the spelling book, where do we start? What should we teach first?

The answer to that question is the same for spelling as it is for any other subject. The first thing you should teach is the first thing your students need to learn. And when I've taught in classrooms the first thing I see most students needing is a set of strategies for

figuring out what to do when they can't spell a word. Here are the things I suggest. Please feel free to modify this list as you see fit:[4]

What to Do When You Can't Spell a Word

While You are Writing	After You Have Finished Writing
➢ **Take a guess by sounding it out.** ➢ Say the word to yourself very slowly; really stretch it out. ➢ Think of the beginning sound and write down the letters that make that sound. ➢ Think of the middle sound and write down the letters that make that sound. ➢ Think of the ending sound and write down the letters that make that sound. ➢ Look at the word carefully and see if it looks right. Read it back to yourself to make sure you'll be able to read it later even if it isn't correct.	➢ **Edit your piece for spelling.** ➢ Circle or underline the words you are unsure of. ➢ Check the spelling of each word in a dictionary or other resource. ➢ If you can't find the word in a dictionary or you don't know how to use a dictionary, ask someone for help. ➢ Make the necessary corrections. ➢ Recopy the piece for publication.

The important thing for students to learn is that some strategies are more efficient when they are composing, while others are more appropriate when they are editing. When students are drafting, we don't want them to stop writing for very long, so anything that involves them breaking their train of thought, like asking another student to spell a word or getting up to ask you or another adult, probably isn't going to be the best option. Later, however, after they've finished writing, they can attend in a more detailed and time consuming way to editing their work without having to worry about remembering what they wanted to write in the first place.

[4] I have very consciously split this list into things to do while composing and things to do while editing. Diane Snowball points out that individual writers have different preferences about when they want to check the spelling of a word. She is, of course, absolutely correct. Sometimes, I know that I've just got to get a word right before I continue. However, in my experience, primary writers are so paranoid about correct spelling that if we let them they'll want to correct every word as they go along, and won't get much writing done as a result. So, at least with the little ones, I'm fairly strict with my approach. I get good results, too. Usually in just one Writer's Workshop class, if I really stay on top of it, I can get most kids inventing spellings before they feel like asking someone for help.

Another thing to be aware of is that we really do have to teach students how to sound words out. I find that many students do not know how to match the sounds they hear in their head onto letters and letter patterns. Here are a few things students can try:

How to Sound Out Words

- Say the word very slowly to yourself; really stretch it out so you can "listen" carefully for the different sounds.
- For help with the beginning, think of a word you know that starts with the same sound. Thinking of "dog" may help you with "dream."
- For help with the middle, think of a word that sounds like it might be inside the word you want to spell. If you can spell "and" you might be able to spell "candy".
- For help with the ending, think of a word that rhymes with the word you want to spell. If you can spell "cat" you may be able to spell "flat."
- When all else fails just write down the first sound and the last sound.
- Always write something, even if it's just a single letter, so you can remember the word you wanted in the first place.

There is one other "lesson" that I often find myself teaching right away the very first time I work with a class. I find that a lot of students have gotten the message that spelling doesn't matter. I often hear people telling them: "Don't worry about your spelling."[5] When I hear this I know what these well-meaning adults are trying to get across, but I also know that they are not succeeding with this particular choice of words. Some students take this to heart and literally don't worry about their spelling. This defeats spelling consciousness and discourages them from applying spelling strategies. Other students may feel confused if not betrayed—they know that their teachers and their parents (and even their classmates) are watching their spelling very closely, yet someone in authority is telling them that it doesn't matter. Ironically, for these students, telling them not to worry about their spelling just makes them worry even more. Hearing over and over that spelling doesn't matter when they know that it does sounds confusing at best, deceitful at worst.

[5] On a loosely related note: the other phrase I hear a lot is "sloppy copy" as in: "Don't worry about your handwriting on your sloppy copy." For some students the phrase "sloppy copy" becomes forever associated with first draft, and since kids spend 5-10 times more time drafting than publishing, this means they practice writing sloppily 80-90% of the time they write. This just can't be helpful. Is it ever to anyone's advantage to write sloppily on purpose? Why don't we just stop using the phrase (and especially those SLOPPY COPY stamps I'm beginning to see), and again just tell kids the truth about things: that their handwriting needs to be legible so that people can read what they write. Telling kids that it is OK for them to be sloppy merely makes it harder for them to be neat.

Try something like this instead:

> Every word has a correct spelling. It is important to spell correctly so people can read what you write. Try your best. Sound it out; use spelling strategies to make an educated guess. **After** you have finished writing your piece, circle the words that look wrong to you, then look them up in a dictionary or other resource. If you can't find the word in a dictionary, ask someone else to help you. Don't **ever** be afraid to write a word down because you don't know how to spell it. You can always correct any spelling mistakes during the Editing stage of the Writing Process.

Yes, there is a lot of content here. But I feel that it's important for students to have at least an inkling of the whole process right from the start. I don't want them to "worry" about spelling either, but rather than telling them not to worry, I'd rather they actually didn't worry, and I think the best way to make that a reality is to give them the tools they need to get the job done right.

All of this works best, I think, when it is presented not as a formal lesson, but given ad hoc during Writer's Workshop when you notice students not writing because they can't spell a word, or when several students have come up to you, or asked their classmates how to spell a word. These "teachable" moments are always, in my opinion, the best times to get key points across. Of course, this lesson needs to be repeated from time to time whenever students "regress" back to the habit of not writing because they don't know how to spell a word they need. But after you've presented this simple list of strategies (and probably posted it somewhere in the room), a gentle reminder should be all that is necessary.

A Few Simple But Effective Spelling Activities

OK, if we're not going to use spelling books, spelling lists, and spelling tests, what are we going to do? Good question. When school districts began in the 1980's to take away the spelling books, they forgot to tell teachers what to do instead. So, naturally, many teachers just stopped teaching spelling. This is not good, but in one sense I can't blame teachers too much. If school districts had traded those classroom sets of spelling texts for just one teacher's copy of Richard Gentry's *Teaching Kids to Spell* or Diane Snowball's *Teaching Spelling,* teachers would have had lots of good information to work with. But that didn't happen, and for reasons I do not understand it does not appear likely to happen any time in the future. Hence, the need for this document. Gentry and Snowball offer literally dozens of wonderful ideas in their books. But some seem more fundamental or universally applicable than others, so those are the ones I'll cover briefly here.

Makin' a List, Checkin' it Twice

Lists have traditionally been the backbone of our spelling programs, and that tradition should be continued. What needs to change is the person making the list and the words that go onto it. Probably the single best activity you can do with students—and you can do it over and over—is to help them make lists of words they need for writing, sounds they need to master, or spelling patterns they need to learn about. Here's an activity Diane Snowball showed me in the workshop I attended in Atlanta.

Start by picking one of the 44 sounds of the English language and the ask the students what words they know that have that sound in it.

What words do you know that have the /k/ sound?

like	talk	cake	school	trick
car	cat	quit	back	lock
king	call	ticket	book	ache
crack	kind	back	look	think

Underline the letters that make the /k/ sound in each word:

li<u>k</u>e	tal<u>k</u>	<u>c</u>a<u>k</u>e	s<u>ch</u>ool	tri<u>ck</u>
<u>c</u>ar	<u>c</u>at	<u>qu</u>it	ba<u>ck</u>	lo<u>ck</u>
<u>k</u>ing	<u>c</u>all	ti<u>ck</u>et	boo<u>k</u>	a<u>ch</u>e
<u>c</u>ra<u>ck</u>	<u>k</u>ind	ba<u>ck</u>	loo<u>k</u>	thin<u>k</u>

Group the words according to the letters that make the /k/ sound:

k	**c**	**ck**	**ch**	**qu**
li<u>k</u>e	<u>c</u>ar	cra<u>ck</u>	s<u>ch</u>ool	<u>qu</u>it
<u>k</u>ing	<u>c</u>at	ti<u>ck</u>et	a<u>ch</u>e	
tal<u>k</u>	<u>c</u>all	ba<u>ck</u>		
ca<u>k</u>e	<u>c</u>rack	tri<u>ck</u>		
<u>k</u>ind	<u>c</u>ake	lo<u>ck</u>		
boo<u>k</u>				
loo<u>k</u>				
thin<u>k</u>				

What do you notice about the letters that make up the /k/ sound?

There are five ways to make the /k/ sound: "k", "c", "ck", "ch", and "qu".
"k", "c", and "ck" are the most common ways to make the /k/ sound.
"ch" and "qu" are the least common ways to make the /k/ sound.
"ck" never comes at the beginning of a word.
It's always "ck", never "kc".

What I like about this activity is that it doesn't really matter what sound you use, or what words the students come up with, or what inferences they draw. (Some sounds like /k/ have more possibilities than others because they map to more spelling patterns; Diane Snowball suggests that you start with a sound like this that is relatively easy for the stu-

dents to hear; sounds like /m/ or /n/ might be a bit tougher.) Just doing the activity itself reinforces one of the most important early spelling skills: associating letter patterns with sounds. This same kind of exercise can be done with letter patterns. Pick a pattern like "ant", for example, and then have students sort the words by the different sounds they find (in this case, two: /ant/ as in the insect, and /awnt/ as in "want" or "restaurant").

Most good spelling list activities follow this predictable pattern:

What Good Spelling List Activities Look Like	
Step 1:	Decide on the criteria for the list.
Step 2:	Have students generate the list based on the criteria.
Step 3:	Have students organize the list by some meaningful attribute.
Step 4:	Have students analyze the organization and draw inferences based on that analysis.

Notice that your only direct involvement is in deciding on the criteria for the list, and even that responsibility can be turned over to the students after they've gotten the hang of it.

Criteria for lists can come from several sources but should always be related in some way to the words students need for writing (in the previous example, for instance, the word "bookkeeper" would not have been a good one for a primary class—even though it is one of the only words in our language that has a double k, and as such is worthy of note—because few students will have a need to write it):

Criteria For Good Spelling Lists

- Any of the 44 sounds of the English language: the /k/[6] sound from the example.
- Any of the dozens of common spelling patterns: "oo" words, for example, or any words with double consonants, or words that contain the spelling pattern "ough", etc.
- Words that share similar meanings: paper, wallpaper, newspaper, papers, papered.
- Words that are related morphologically: photo, photograph, telephoto, photon, photosphere, photosynthesis, photographic, photogenic, etc.
- Words from units of study: space, rocket, Mars, rover, Barnacle Bill, Yogi, etc.
- Common words we need all the time: it, and, the, you, I, me, my, mom, dad, etc.
- Place names: Seattle, Washington, United States, Enumclaw, California, Oregon, etc.
- Any other logical source you can think of that will generate words related to student writing.

[6]Diane Snowball makes the point that it is very important to help children distinguish between the letter or spelling pattern and the sound, and to make sure children are aware that there is often more than one way to make a particular sound. She suggests, and I'm inclined to agree, that the age-old practice of telling kids that "a" is for "apple", "b" is for "boy", etc., probably does more harm than good as it fixes in the child's mind the mistaken notion that one letter equals one sound. We should probably try something like this: there's a "b" at the beginning of "boy", in the middle of "about", and at the end of "crab". Picture dictionaries should include examples of initial, medial, and final sounds in this manner.

In *Teaching Spelling,* Faye Bolton and Diane Snowball offer this helpful contrast between the traditional view of looking at word lists and the contemporary view:

Traditional	Contemporary
➢ Commercially published lists, unrelated to students' writing needs, were provided and words were relegated to particular grade levels.	➢ Classroom lists are written of the words students want to learn for their personal writing needs.
➢ Words on the list were to be memorized by rote with very little thinking required.	➢ Words on a list are not to be learned by rote but are listed to focus on a relationship (meaning, spelling pattern, or common sound) that exists between words in the English written language.
➢ Words were attributed levels of difficulty: two-letter words were supposed to be easier than three-letter words, which were supposed to be easier than four-letter words, and so on.	➢ It is now known that a word is not inherently difficult; a word is only difficult for a writer who has not seen it often or has not used it when writing. The number of letters in a word does not necessarily affect the student's ability to learn the word.
➢ Some words were thought of as word demons or difficult words.	➢ There is no need to give misleading and negative information.

Here are some lists that most classes could benefit from. Have the students generate their own sets of words in categories like these and then put them up around the room so students can refer to them while writing.

Numbers	Compound Words	Words That End in "y"	Words Around the House
one	pancakes	try	mom
two	applesauce	my	dad
three	Sunday	why	brother
four	railroad	fly	sister
five	grandma	happy	dog
six	grandpa	lucky	cat
seven	playground	sunny	yard
eight	football	funny	dinner
etc.	etc.	etc.	etc.

What About Spelling Rules?

Many parents, and even some teachers, ask: "Why don't we teach students the rules of spelling?" Are traditional spelling rules yet another casualty of our permissive age? No, they have succumbed instead to common sense and the research-proven fact that students learn more effectively when they develop their own hypotheses by inquiring directly into the nature of written language and, in essence, form the rules all by themselves. Because of our language's complex etymological roots few spelling rules are very useful,[7] and it has been shown in virtually all aspects of human learning that students learn more effectively when they derive "rules" themselves from their own inquiry.

[7] There's a wonderful study described in detail in Marilyn Jager Adams' *Beginning to Read* in which an English teacher/researcher named Clyme proved the low utility of common phonics rules by checking those generalizations

In *My Kid Can't Spell,* Richard Gentry has this to say about traditional spelling rules:

> Memorizing lots of spelling rules is old-fashioned. It doesn't work well because spelling rules are usually complicated and frightening like this one from Noah Webster's 1829 *Elementary Spelling Book:*
>
> ***Formation of the plural number of nouns.***
>
> The regular plural of nouns is formed by the addition of *s* to the singular, which letter unites with most consonants in the same syllable, but sounds like *z* after all the consonants except *f, p, q, t, k,* or *c* with the sound of *k*.
>
> Richard Gentry, My Kid Can't Spell

Help your students learn a few good spelling rules. Here are some good rules (from *My Kid Can't Spell*) with rough indicators of when students may be ready for them:

Rule	Exception	When Most Students are Ready For It
The Qu Rule *Q* is always followed by *u*	Iraq	1st Grade
The Vowel in Every Syllable Rule Every syllable has a vowel or a *y*	--	Middle or End of 1st Grade
The Silent E Rule When words end in silent *e*, drop the *e* when adding endings beginning with a vowel (have --> having); keep the *e* when adding endings beginning with a consonant (late --> lately).	--	Around 2nd Grade
Changing Y to I When the singular form ends with consonant + *y*, change the *y* to *i* and ad *es* (baby --> babies). When the singular form ends with vowel + *y*, add *s* (boy --> boys).	--	Around 3rd or 4th Grade.
The EI or IE Rule Write *i* before *e* Except after *c* Or when sounded like *a* As in neighbor and weigh (Weird and neither Aren't the same either)	caffeine, codeine, either, Fahrenheit, fiery, financier, height, hierarchy, neither, protein, seize, seizure, sheik, sleigh, stein, their, weird	Around 4th or 5th Grade.

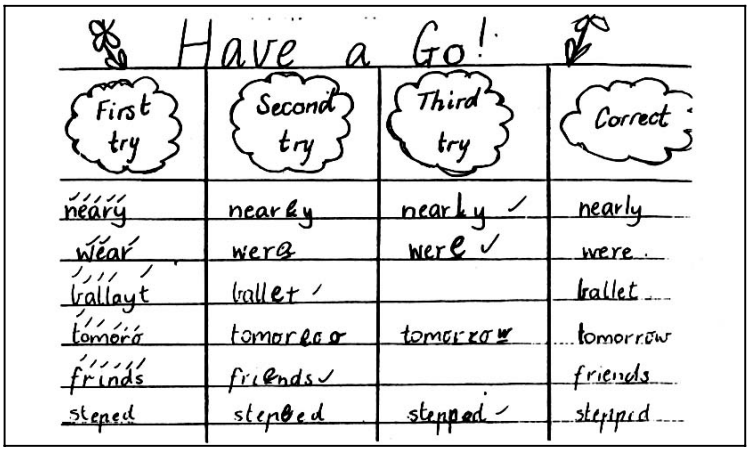
most commonly offered by phonics programs against the actual words children encountered in the accompanying basal readers.

Have a Go!

Just telling kids that it's good to invent spellings is not enough to get them to do it regularly or very well. They need additional incentive.

> When students are first beginning to write it is better to encourage them to try words without asking how to spell them. Teachers need to be consistent about not showing students how to spell each word or the students will not develop the strategy of making an attempt first.
>
> As learning how to spell involves problem solving, all students should be encouraged to attempt a word first, perhaps trying it several ways, and then to check with a resource. The Have-A-Go card is useful for this.
>
> Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton, Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource

I would like to make a suggestion here. Both Richard Gentry and Diane Snowball refer to this device as a "Have-A-Go" card. But that's such a British-sounding name that I wonder if American students, particularly the little ones, will understand what it really means. I'd like to propose calling it a "Guess-And-Check" card because that more accurately describes the strategy being used. It's also identical to one of the more common math strategies advocated by Marilyn Burns and other math experts, so it is possible that students will understand it from that context.



Have a Go!

First try	Second try	Third try	Correct
neárý	nearky	nearky ✓	nearly
wéar	were	were ✓	were
ballayt	ballet ✓		ballet
tómóró	tomorroor	tomorrow	tomorrow
frínds	friends ✓		friends
steped	stepped	stepped ✓	stepped

The card gives students a place to practice taking guesses. You'll notice that on this card, the teacher has indicated which letters the student has gotten correct by putting tick marks above each correct letter on each try. When the student gets the word correctly, the teacher puts a check mark to the side. If the student doesn't get it in three tries, the teacher writes the word correctly in the last column.

There are many possible variations on this (Gentry, for example, draws his "Have-A-Go" card with only two columns for guessing). Students who can use dictionaries and other resources won't need a teacher to tell them when they're right. Or students could work in pairs. The particulars of how you manage this activity are not as important as the activity itself: making multiple guesses about the spellings of words and then checking to see if one is correct.

Simple Memory Aids

When students do need to memorize spellings, please give them some help. I don't know how many times I was told by my teachers to memorize something for an upcoming test. Yet not once in my 13 years of schooling (or even in college for that matter) did anyone ever teach me anything about memorizing (and no, flash cards do not constitute teaching someone how to memorize; flash cards often do more harm than good).[8] The key to any good memory aid is its associative power. That is to say, students will have a much better chance of memorizing information if they can make a meaningful association between the information to be learned a second piece of information (ironically, in the case of memory, having more to memorize is easier, as long as it's the right stuff). Here are some simple memory aids for helping students with homophones:

Memory Aids For Homophones

- You **hear** with your **ear**.
- I'll stay **here**, you stay t**here.**
- **Their** indicates possession; an **heir** will inherit and gain possession of something.
- A set of **tw**ins is **two** children.
- The **witch** has an **itch**.
- The **principal** is your **pal**.
- **All right** is two words; don't get it **all wrong**.
- The **S**ahara De**s**ert (one *s* in **desert**).
- Your favorite dessert is **s**omething **s**weet (two *s's* in **dessert**).

Do You Need a Word Wall?

"Ms. Snowball, I've heard you talk about Word Walls all day," I said, during a workshop I attended on spelling. "Would you go so far as to say that every primary classroom should have a Word Wall?"

"Absolutely. Why not?"

Well, it doesn't get much more definite than that. According to one of the world's top experts on spelling, every primary classroom should have a significant portion of wall space devoted to words. And yet, I only see Word Walls (or, more accurately, tiny portions of walls) in about half the primary classes I visit. And only about half of those have

---

[8] This is no small issue. I work with kids all the time who have, for years, been told to memorize large amounts of information, but have never been told how. Their educational lives have literally been ruined by this as they have come to believe they are stupid simply because they cannot remember miscellaneous information for tests. Please help kids with this. Teach them useful associative memory techniques when you want them to memorize information. A wonderful resource of these techniques is *The Memory Book* by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas, published by Ballantine. It's a $5 paperback that was written over 20 years ago. No educator should be without it. Even if you don't find the book particular useful for your age group, the basic concept of what associative memory is and how it works is incredibly valuable.

actually set up their walls in a way that they could be easily used by students to find words for use in their writing.

There's no one way to set up a Word Wall. Just try to keep these things in mind:

A Few Thoughts on Word Walls

- If you teach in grades K-2 (and probably 3rd grade as well) you need a Word Wall.
- The wall you use should be the wall your students can see most easily when they write.
- The words on the wall should be generated by the students in response to their needs as writers.[9]
- The wall should be dynamic. New words should go up and old words should come down on a regular basis. (Putting words on cards is better than writing them on paper.)
- The words should be organized in some logical way (alphabetical is the most popular but some words can be organized better by categories). Ideally the students should suggest this organization as they are the ones who need to find the words.
- Use the wall all year. Don't cover it up or take it down at various times. It is one of the most valuable tools young writers have for learning to spell new words, but they will only use it if they know it's always available.

A Few Common Practices That Have Little or No Value

Because certain dubious practices are so widespread, most books on spelling feel the need to mention those activities that teachers should not engage in. And though I hate to give negative advice, I am compelled to repeat here the most common non-recommendations that I have run across. The following practices are not recommended because they are either of no positive value (and hence, are a waste of time) or have been shown to hinder normal spelling development:

[9] When I teach Writer's Workshop to kindergarten or 1st grade classes, I often ask, just before breaking for writing time, "Who needs a word for writing today?" I then write down any words that the kids tell me they need. At the end of the period I might bring the kids together and ask them if any of the words I had written on the board at the beginning of class should go on the Word Wall—that is, if they think they'll need them again, they should go on the wall; if not, then they shouldn't. Either way, it's up to them, not me.

Just Don't Do It!

- Having students write their spelling words in sentences.
- Having students copy words out repeatedly.
- Having students alphabetize their spelling words as a means of learning to spell them; alphabetizing is, of course, great for helping students find words, and a good thing to do when students create their own dictionaries or similar resources.
- Having students "unscramble" strings of letters to find words. (This is unusually bad because it frustrates the visual recognition that is the single most important skill students can develop.)
- Correcting spelling errors for students instead of showing them how to correct errors themselves.
- Asking students to memorize spelling words without giving them any strategies for improving their memorization, as in "Memorize this list for Friday's spelling test."
- Telling students to "study" their words without giving them any strategies for how to study them.
- Giving weekly spelling tests.
- Lowering grades on written work solely because of poor spelling.
- Assessing spelling ability solely on the basis of the number of words a student can spell correctly out of a pre-selected list.
- Assigning students to spelling groups based solely on their ability to take traditional spelling tests.

A Perspective on Perfection

"I have a Ph.D. in spelling. I still suffer from poor-speller's anxiety. In writing the first third of this book, I made forty-seven spelling errors in the rough draft. I corrected thirty-five and my proofreaders corrected the other twelve."

The book in question is Richard Gentry's *Spel... is a Four-Letter Word.* It's only 53 pages long, and they're small pages at that. By my count, one third of the book weighs in at around 5000 words. So, Richard Gentry, a professional writer (with a Ph.D. in spelling!), commits about one spelling error every hundred words or so on a first draft, corrects about three fourths of those errors on a final draft, and relies on a group of professional editors to find and correct the remaining fourth.

And this is not an unusual thing. I recently read a published hardcover book written by one of the most eminent historians of our day in which I came across more than 40 spelling errors (I found several right off the bat, so I thought I'd keep a loose count for this document). And those were just the ones I counted while casually reading it over a three week period. I'm not a good proofreader (as this document will probably attest), so I can only imagine how many errors there really were.

The point is this: perfect spelling is a myth. Once writers start writing in any expansive way, spelling errors are virtually guaranteed to creep in. So why not give students

the same breaks we give adults? Do adults take spelling tests or memorize arbitrary lists of words? Do adults have to spell every word perfectly every time they write? Can't adults ask other adults for help spelling words? Don't adults get to use resources like dictionaries and computers? Don't adults invent spellings when they don't know how to spell a technical or foreign word, or an unusual name? Don't adults ask each other to proofread documents to help them find errors? Don't adults often have other people who edit their work and help them prepare it for publication?

If professional writers with advanced degrees, and eminent historians writing for major publishers, get the benefit of "perks" like these why can't we extend this generosity to 5- and 6-year olds who may still be struggling with the notion that the letter "b" points to the right? As Richard Gentry points out:

> Good teachers are not touchy about minor points of spelling. In fact, undue emphasis on correct spelling often impedes children's spelling development. Anything that makes spelling unpleasant, more difficult, or threatening makes learning to spell more difficult. Children at the early stages of spelling development should not be expected to spell like adults.
>
> Richard Gentry, Spel... is a Four-Letter Word.

Even among more developed spellers spelling is never really a problem that anyone need be anxious about. Why? Because it can always be fixed. Think about it this way: there is always a correct answer for any spelling question. Vast resources are readily available to solve any spelling problem any writer may encounter. From this perspective, spelling is the last thing we should be worrying about for there is no other writing problem that is so easily and so completely solved. But because it shows great respect for the reader, because it is too tedious and distracting from the compositional process to be forever wondering about spelling, and because there is such immense and pervasive social stigma attached to one's ability to spell conventionally, we need to provide our students with thorough and thoughtful spelling instruction that serves their needs as writers and thinkers.

If You Wanna Teach Spelling, You Oughta Read These Books

As I said at the beginning, this document is based on several excellent books. If you really want to do a good job teaching spelling, I would recommend getting at least one and possible two of them. Here are my recommendations:

- **If you only want to get one book, get "**Teaching Spelling: A Practical Resource" **by Faye Bolton and Diane Snowball, published by Heinemann.** This book contains a ton of useful information including dozens of strategies for teaching specific types of words.
- **If you would like to get a second book to complement this one, I would recommend Richard Gentry's "**My Kid Can't Spell" **published by Heinemann.** Because it is written for parents it is a little less technical. It is also very short. Gentry also includes several word lists that you can use to place students at various grade levels. Bolton and Snowball don't really seem to believe in this (they take a truly developmental stance), but if you don't feel comfortable without specific word lists and grade level evaluations, this book will fill in some of the blanks for you. This book also has a nice parent-friendly developmental spelling continuum with good examples and explanations.
- **If you would like to get a third book, get "**Ideas For Spelling" **by Faye Bolton and Diane Snowball, published by Heinemann.** This book includes even more ideas for spelling activities and also adds a developmental spelling continuum.
- **Two other good books, both by Richard Gentry, are "**Teaching Kids to Spell" **and** "Spel... is a Four-Letter Word"**, both published by Heinemann.** You'll find lots of useful material in either of these.

With resources like these available there's really no reason to use a spelling textbook or a spelling series. There's no research support for spelling textbooks, and with money so tight in schools today, we'd all be a lot better off if everyone just stopped buying them. For about $40 you can buy enough professional books to be an excellent spelling teacher. And that's a one-time expenditure that will last you yo~~ur ent~~ire carear (oops!) career.

Let's work together to make your teaching the best it can be.

Please contact me any time!

Even the best workshops and teaching materials can't meet the needs of every teacher all the time. That's why we need to stay in touch. Send me an e-mail any time you have a question. I'll do my best to get back to you quickly with answers, additional teaching materials, or other resources.

Please send suggestions, questions, and corrections to:
stevepeha@ttms.org

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click here.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

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