

Bragg Spells Out Spelling

By DEBORAH EDWARDS

Many people want and need to read and spell better, but few are granted a second chance to learn what the either have forgotten or never leaned in school.

Dick Bragg of Springfield is one of those few people. The father of five children, he wondered why were graduated from school knowing how to spell, when he did not.

"I decided that I would start keeping notes on the letters of the alphabet, and everything I learned about a letter would go into the book under its own heading.

Spelling Talks

That was the beginning of the "Dick Bragg's Spelling Talks.

"It took four years to develop the spelling chart that is now a part of my program to teach people - who never thought they could - how to spell."

Bragg made the first version of his spelling chart in 1968. A self-employed printer, Bragg prints his own version

A self-employed printer, Bragg prints his own version of a spelling book and makes a cassette tape recording of his spelling talks.

Once a week Bragg volunteers his time to the men at Hampden County House of Correction on York Street, teaching them how to spell.

"It's become a hobby with me," said Bragg. "I've got something in common with my students, that on other teacher has - 'I've got 20 years of stupidity behind me,'" he said.

"I know what that kid or that man is thinking at the back of the room - the one who's scared to death that the teacher's going to call on him to spell or read," he said. "I know because I was like that kid once myself."

Bragg believes that the children who don't catch on right away to the

concepts of reading and spelling are left behind as their classmates go on to more complex concepts in language, such as grammar and syntax.

"The key in learning how to spell is in learning pronunciation," said Bragg.

Different Sounds

According to Bragg, many kids never learn the difference between the long and short pronunciations of the alphabet. At best, the teacher may go over the short pronunciations of the vowels, but this doesn't make sense to a lot of kids unless they learn the short pronunciation of the whole alphabet.

"I had one kid who, when I asked to read the alphabet using the long pronunciations, he read the alphabet in the usual way, "a, b, c, d..." - very slowly and carefully. But when I asked him to read the alphabet again, using the short pronunciations, he repeated the long pronunciations, "a, b, c..." - but this time read it fast! He had no idea that there was more than one way to pronounce the letters of the alphabet," said Bragg.

The pronunciation of vowels, however, is not limited to the two pronunciations, says Bragg.

In the pronunciation guide for the letter "A" on his spelling chart, he notes the different ways it is pronounced in the following words...*add, aviation, auto, and America.*

In this example, the letter "A" is pronounced four different ways.

Combination of Letters

Now consider the pronunciation of the words...*bay, aide, they, and Chevrolet.* Here, according to Bragg's chart, are examples of the *ay* in *bay*, the *ai* in *aide*, the *ey* in *they*, and the *ei* in *Chevrolet*, all pronounced as if the letter "A" were present.

"As a kid, I couldn't understand why the pronunciation of the letters "ice" in the word *ice* didn't apply in a word such as *police*," said Bragg.

He calls these "oddball words," words that don't follow a set pattern of phonetics.

However, most words do follow a pattern, and Bragg has created a mnemonics system for recalling the rules of spelling.

For example, consider the word *city*, and the word *coffee*. The letter "C" in the word *city*, takes on an "S", or a soft sound. However, in the word *coffee*, the letter "C" takes on a "K", or a hard sound.

This hard and soft sound effect on the letter "C" and the letter "G", says Bragg, is due to those letters being followed by "fat" or "skinny" vowels.

Fat vowels are *a, o, and u*, or the vowels that look fat and rounded. Skinny vowels are *e, i, and y*, or the vowels that are letters made up of lines or sticks.

"Other mnemonic devices in Bragg's system include "a fence, a jack rabbit, a rabbit, a twin rabbit, a dead rabbit, and a king fish."

"I never did like the rule referred to as "the silent "E" at the end of a word," because it's not silent - it's there to tell you something," said Bragg. "I call the letter "E" at the end of a word a jack rabbit, jumping the fence, making the previous vowel long.

Jack Rabbit Example

Consider the word *din*. The "N" in *din* is a fence. Now consider the word *dine*. The "E" in *dine* is a jack rabbit, which jumps the fence and turns the "I" in *din*, which is a short vowel sound, into a long vowel sound in *dine*.

Add a "R" to get *diner*, and the jack rabbit can still jump over the fence. But, add another fence, as in *dinner*, and the jack rabbit is no longer able to jump two fences. Therefore, the "I" in *dinner* remains short.

Twin Rabbit

The twin rabbit does two things. Consider the word *cube*. The "E" in the word *cube*, is a jack rabbit. Now consider the word *Cuba*. The letter "A" in *Cuba* does two things - it

jumps the fence to make the "U" long, and it remains in place to be pronounced as the short "A" sound

"This is true for most words that end in the letter "A"," said Bragg, citing as examples *America* and *Africa*.

A rabbit, however, does not have to jump a fence. Consider the word *day*. The "Y" in *day* does not have to jump over the fence, but the effect on the previous vowel is the same.

Then, there is the dead rabbit - as in the word *August*. The "U" following the "A" in *August* is a dead rabbit, because it doesn't make the letter "A" into a long or a short sounding "A".

King Fish

Last there is the king fish. A king fish, according to Bragg, is an "E" at the end of a word of importance, which sets if off from its counterpart without the "E" - such as in the case of *Main* Street, and the state of *Maine*. Both *Maine* and *Main* are pronounced the same, but it is the air of importance carried by the state of Maine, which needs the "E" to set if off. Another example of the king fish: *aid* and *aide*, (and *aide* being the person who runs around with a state of importance).

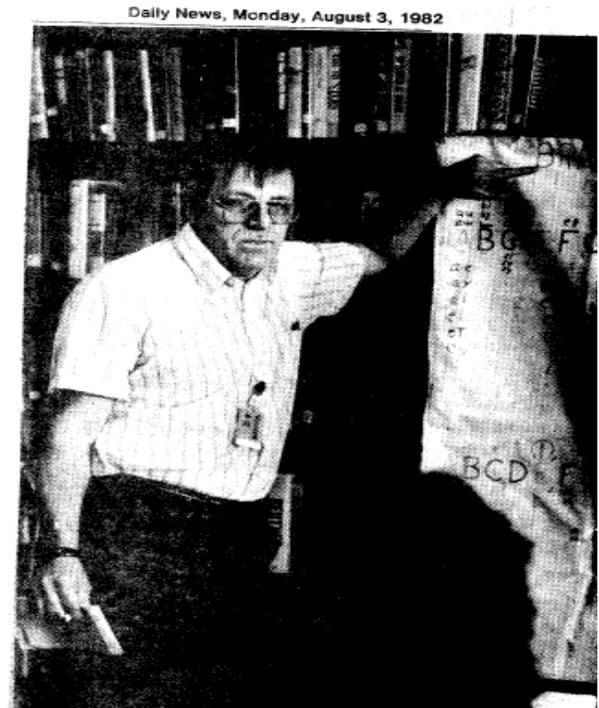
According to Bill Toller, director of education at the jail, there has been a lot of positive response to Bragg's spelling talks.

"It's given them (the inmates) some confidence. It's not an area we emphasize for the GED, or high school equivalency exam," he said, "although you have to be able to read to pass the exam. Ninety percent of the men that come here haven't finished high school."

"We view Dick as a community resource," he said.

Toller said that since the advent of the educational programs at the jail five years ago, 350 inmates have passed the GED. During the five years before the program started, only 37 did so.

Bragg says he'd like to work with teens or children, and with Toller's letter of recommendation, is trying to get a spelling program started at Springfield Technical Community College.



WORD WISE - Dick Bragg of Springfield presents one of his special spelling classes to inmates at York Street Jail.