

Educational solution as easy as A,B,C

By Myles L. Cooley

The seventh-grader and his parents sit down in my office. The boy's parents have brought him to a psychologist because his grades in school are poor, he refuses to do homework, and he is disruptive in class and becoming defiant at home.

The youngster tells me everything would be fine if his parents would get off his back. An evaluation reveals that this boy's family life is stable, and he is not suffering from a serious psychological disorder. His IQ is above average.

The one finding that offers the most likely explanation for his behavior is that his reading skills are at a third-grade level.

Surely, the evaluation for all school failures and behavior problems is not as simple as a lack of reading skills. But for millions of schoolchildren, the explanation is that simple. By the fourth grade, 20 percent of American students do not recognize enough words to read adequately, and more than 40 percent read too slowly to understand what they are reading.

The prognosis is poor for these students. They will represent a disproportionate number of our high school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, substance abusers and criminals.

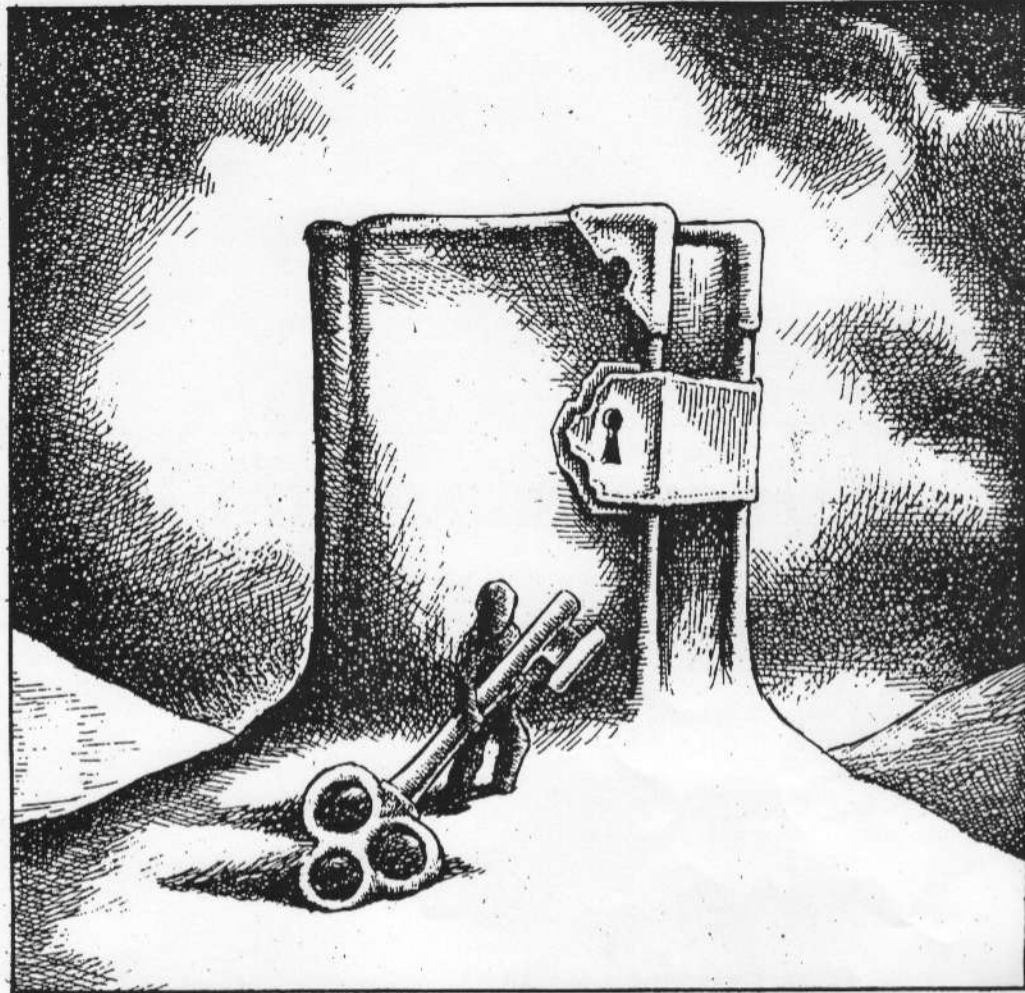
Current solutions to this problem are inadequate. Although well-intentioned, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, which provides special education services for almost 2 million students with reading disabilities, is riddled with problems.

First, intervention for all but the youngest students arrives long after the horse is out of the barn. A delay in identifying and remediating poor reading skills after the third grade leaves most of these students with lifelong reading deficits.

Second, there are huge inconsistencies in the process of identifying students with reading disabilities. Since IDEA allows states to determine the criteria for eligibility, a child might be eligible for services in one state but ineligible after crossing over the state line.

Third, almost all states base eligibility on formulas that require a child's reading score to be much lower than his IQ. Since children with learning problems learn less over time, they tend to score lower on IQ tests. This lessens the likelihood that there will be a large enough discrepancy between a child's IQ and reading scores to qualify him for services.

Partly because of the requirements of these formulas, there are an estimated 10 million students with reading problems in our schools. It's not that parents might not have suspected a problem. Sometimes, parents will request that the school evaluate their child for a reading problem.



If they are fortunate to get an evaluation, they are far too often falsely reassured that the child doesn't have a problem. The truth may be that reading deficits were revealed but the scores did not fit the eligibility formula, and special education services could not be offered. Schools may deny there is a problem because they cannot offer a solution.

Since current criteria serve only a small percentage of children with reading problems, it would seem logical to reevaluate the requirements for identification. A good starting place might be to remove a child's IQ from the criteria.

Some current proposed solutions do ignore IQ scores. President Clinton would have the Education Department develop national tests in reading to be administered to fourth-graders. He also proposes sending 1 million college students into schools to provide reading tutoring to second-through fourth-graders. But these interventions are generally too little, too late for most poor readers.

The polemics surrounding a whole language vs. phonetic approach to reading is sacrificing children's futures. It is time

for a national effort that emphasizes both phonics and reading for meaning to every kindergarten and first-grade student in this country.

All children's reading skills should be screened before the end of first grade, with immediate remediation provided for students found to still be deficient.

Before we can effectively teach all our 6-year-olds to read, however, we may face a larger challenge. We will have to teach most of our elementary school teachers how to teach reading.

The window for learning to read opens and closes much earlier than most people realize. If you don't intervene during this critical time, the window may close. Investing in your child while the window is open will surely cost you money. But it is likely to cost you much more later in life paying for the fallout from the closed window. For the seventh-grader in my office, I'm not sure that any amount of money can restore his motivation and self-esteem, let alone encourage him to learn to read.

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