



*A Union of Professionals*

## Early Intervention for Students with Learning and Behavior Problems

This nation's experience with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and its successor, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), demonstrates that when more is expected of disabled youngsters—and they are provided with the necessary supports and services, combined with sound instructional practices based on rigorous research—these students respond. Many learning disabilities that once doomed students to illiteracy and joblessness are now seen as challenges to be hurdled on the path to lifelong learning, gainful employment and successful lives. Many children with physical and cognitive disabilities who once would have been consigned to a lifetime of institutionalization are now being prepared for independent and rewarding adulthoods. Yet, there is still much that must be improved. Previous AFT resolutions have described the steps that must be taken to ensure that standards are raised and supports and services are improved for *all* students with disabilities. This resolution seeks to address a separate, but related, problem. In many school districts around the country, students with correctable academic and behavior problems have been misidentified as disabled. When such students fall too far behind, they become prime candidates for special education referrals. For example, we know that some students are identified as learning disabled because they never learned to read—thus hindering academic achievement across all subject areas. Since poor and limited-English proficient children—some of whose parents also suffer from low literacy levels—represent a disproportionate percentage of those with low reading achievement, this has meant that a disturbingly high percentage of special education students are poor, minority and limited English proficient. These children need help, not new labels.

New findings from 30 years of international research in such diverse fields as neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, cognitive science and education offer such help. These studies show that most students will succeed, and never need to be referred to special education, if they are taught using effective, research-based methods. It should be noted that instructional services alone are often insufficient to meet students' needs for support for appropriate learning and behavior. As noted by a recent research review by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, "Levels of literacy adequate for high school completion, employability, and responsible citizenship in a democracy are feasible for all but a very small number of individuals." The report also concluded that "in order to prevent reading difficulties, formal instruction in reading needs to focus on two sorts of mastery: word recognition skills and comprehension skills." In other words, very few students will ever develop reading difficulties if all are taught to understand the alphabetic principle and the structure of the English language in the context of a rich, literature-based reading curriculum. We also know that many students have been identified as disabled because they exhibit inappropriate behaviors that do not respond to typical classroom management strategies. Nevertheless, new research demonstrates that there are effective, early behavior-management interventions that could help many such students meet expectations for classroom conduct—even students from very difficult family and social situations. For example, researchers from universities in Arizona, Kansas, Kentucky, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Utah, among other places, have been studying interventions to control antisocial behavior. They found that many school-based practices can be highly effective, including teaching students such skills as anger management, self-monitoring

and social problem solving; the use of behavior contracts; social and extrinsic reinforcement of acceptable behavior; and cooperative small groups to teach social skills. In addition, research shows that behavior problems diminish when schools and districts adopt clear and consistent discipline codes and students are provided with a safe and orderly learning environment.

It should also be noted that reading failure and failure to meet standards of conduct are often mutually reinforcing. When students are being left behind in schoolwork, they may use misbehavior as a coping mechanism. When students disrupt the classroom, they and their classmates find it difficult to learn.

In too many cases, a failure to provide strong reading instruction and to implement early intervention systems that are based on the best research has resulted in:

- a worsening of already low student achievement levels;
- the potential stigmatization of students who have been misidentified as disabled;
- the placement of large numbers of poor and minority students in special education classrooms;
- a needlessly large bureaucratic burden for teachers and administrators, charged with meeting federal regulations on referrals, evaluations, notifications and the delivery of services to students mislabeled as students with disabilities;
- resources being misdirected that could otherwise be used to deliver better special education supports and services to the truly disabled, effective early interventions for nondisabled students in reading and behavior management, and improved professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals.

Therefore, the AFT reiterates its call for the adoption of rigorous and specific academic standards for what students should know and be able to do and clear and consistently enforced codes of student conduct. We further recommend that improved reading instruction and classroom and behavior management systems, based on the best available research, be developed and implemented.

Specifically, we will work at the national, state and local levels to push for:

- states and school districts to develop and fund better diagnostic systems, including: school-entry screening programs that can identify hearing, vision and other medical conditions that may impede student learning, as well as incipient behavior problems; periodic, research-based diagnostic assessments, beginning in kindergarten, that can help spot reading problems early; and procedures for the accurate identification of specific disabilities that may require special services;
- state and district funding for professional development in reading instruction, which is based on the preponderant research evidence, to be provided to all teachers and classroom paraprofessionals in the primary grades on a priority basis. This staff development, which should be made available to all elementary school faculties as quickly as possible, should include training in research-based strategies to prevent students from falling behind and interventions that are effective with students who do develop early reading difficulty;
- state and district funding for professional development for all members of the school staff—teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, bus drivers, food service workers, nonteaching assistants, home visitation workers, administrators, school psychologists, school social workers and guidance counselors and school nurses—in behavior management and effective early intervention strategies;
- state and district funding for lower class sizes, especially in the primary grades, that can help prevent classroom management problems, improve all students' chances for early reading success, and ensure that at-risk and special education students receive the individual attention that they need.

- schools and districts to implement comprehensive support systems for classroom teachers and paraprofessionals, including assistance from reading specialists and behavior specialists in spotting students' problems early and in developing timely interventions; access to appropriate alternative settings, including supervised, in-school suspension rooms to which referrals can be made to bring an immediate end to classroom disruptions; and access to programs that can help accelerate the pace of learning for struggling students, such as one-on-one tutoring, Saturday classes, extra class periods in the problem area ("double-dosing") and summer school.

The system of research-based prevention and early intervention measures, described above, focuses on meeting the needs of students who have been misidentified as students with disabilities. It should also be noted that their adoption will have the additional beneficial consequence of ensuring that true disabilities are identified early and will assist in the delivery of better supports and services to special education students, especially those placed in regular education classrooms. (Passed in 1998)

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\*National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences (1998). Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.