

Advocating for Children

Lawsuits can force school boards to compensate parents but not to change teaching methods.

By Brent Staples

Peter W. D. Wright is an education lawyer who has trouble with reading and writing. It all stems from a familiar learning disability that affects millions of children. The disability seems to centre in the part of the brain that processes language, making it difficult for even genius-caliber children to learn the sounds that correspond to the letters of the alphabet.

Mr. Wright was one of the lucky ones. His condition was diagnosed early, and he was placed with reading teachers who taught him to manage his disability. As a result, he has become one of the top education lawyers of his era.

His most famous victory was in the landmark Supreme Court case *Florence County School District Four v. Carter*, which extended the rights of learning-disabled children who wish to go to private school at public expense. The 1993 ruling held that public schools that fail to educate these children no longer have a say in their educations.

Critics argue that the Carter decision has created a “voucher program for the rich”, allowing parents to give their children a private school education on the taxpayers’ tab. Lawsuits arising from the decision have placed a strain on school boards, draining money that would otherwise be spent on needy students.

But they have also focused attention on the fact that schools are failing to teach many children to read.

What is blindingly obvious is that most learning-disabled children today face the same obstacles and ill-prepared teachers that Peter Wright faced when he started kindergarten in 1951.

His grade one teacher told his parents that the boy had “a good mind,” but complained that he could not keep his mind on his work. Mr. Wright remembers being picked on by peers in elementary school and humiliated by the staff. Teachers openly ridiculed him when he wrote letters backwards or mispronounced words.

Most children treated this way drop out, then end up jobless or in jail. Mr. Wright’s parents, however, were ahead of their time. They sought out Diana Hanbury King, who later became legendary for her work as a tutor in the Orton-Gillingham style of reading instruction, a phonics-based approach that allows learning-disabled children to absorb the rules that govern language while learning the sounds associated with the letters of the alphabet.

People who get help after suffering humiliation in school often grow up to be champions of children who remind them of their younger selves. That is what happened to Mr. Wright.

He went to law school after working as a probation officer and finding that many of the people in his caseload were teenagers who had dropped out of school with undiagnosed learning disabilities.

The defining moment in his professional life came when he encountered Shannon Carter, a South Carolina teenager with an undiagnosed learning disability who arrived at high school virtually illiterate. Labeled lazy and held up to scorn, Shannon became suicidal. Shannon’s parents placed her in private school, then sued the public schools for the cost of tuition.

The Carter ruling opened the floodgates for other successful lawsuits, many of which have been brought on behalf of children who have attended school for as long as seven or eight years without learning to read. School boards are angry at even having to pay the legal fees of families that prevail in court.

It would be nice if the authorities could stop fixating on the lawyers and focus on the fact that so many children are moving through the public schools without learning to read. The most effective way to limit these lawsuits is to adopt the now well-known methods of reading instruction that are used in the private schools where Carter children end up.

No one would be happier than Peter Wright to see an end to this particular line of legal work.

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