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Championing Children for Whom Reading and Learning Are Difficult

By BRENT STAPLES

How old are you? Ninety-nine percent of us answer this question reflexively, without having to think. A reporter who put this question to Peter W. D. Wright several years ago was stunned when Mr. Wright, an education lawyer, resorted to a calculator before answering. When I asked his age over the phone earlier this month, he called to his wife — "Pam, how old am I?" — then said: "I am 57. I have trouble with math."

Mr. Wright also has trouble with reading and writing. It all stems from a familiar learning disability that affects millions of children. The disability seems to center 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. The simplest rules of language elude many of them. Ask for a word that rhymes with "cat," for example, and they may have no idea what the question means.

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. He has argued hundreds of cases. 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 poor urban systems, draining money that would otherwise be spent on needy students. But they have also focused attention on the fact that schools are failing at their primary function — teaching children to read.

The Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act was supposed to provide a wider and more practical fix by upgrading the teacher corps and requiring schools to teach reading in ways that are known to reach nonautomatic readers. All this requires a significant investment. Unfortunately, the federal government has so far shown little appetite for getting the job done. Instead, Congress has begun to lash out at lawyers like Mr. Wright who have made a crusade of suing school districts that continue to fail learning-impaired children.

What smacks you right in the face 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 first grade teacher told his parents that the boy had "a good mind," but complained that he could not keep his mind on 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 backward 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. This 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 similar 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 districts are angry at having to pay the legal fees of families that prevail in court. The House recently passed a bill that would allow the states to limit legal fees in these cases, but the provision is unlikely to succeed in the Senate.

The courts have so far beaten back attempts to strip disabled children of legal representation in cases where the school systems have clearly failed to obey federal disability law. Although some lawyers represent indigent clients in anticipation of collecting fees when they win the case, most cases are settled before they go to trial. The districts sometimes resolve the problem by agreeing to train teachers in how to instruct nonautomatic readers.

It would be nice if Congress 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.