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# Education lawyer has special knowledge

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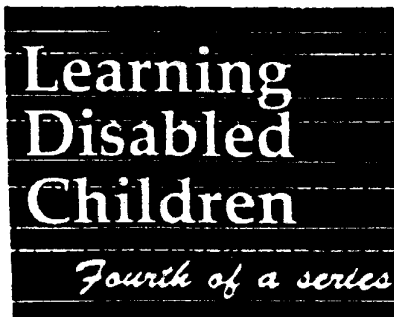
Asked his age, Peter W.D. Wright picked up a calculator, punched in some dates, leaned back in his chair and answered, with a smile, "37."

He was unconcerned that he'd had to make use of a calculator to figure his age. "Yeah, I had problems with math," he said matter-of-factly.

Wright is a lawyer. His educational credentials and his intelligence are obvious. But Wright also is learning disabled. He is successful because he was blessed with educated parents (his father is a Harvard University graduate, his mother has a degree from Radcliffe College) and he grew up in Washington, where, despite many troubles in primary grades, he had access to facilities for children with learning disabilities. That was before most people had ever heard of learning disabilities.

In his Richmond law office, Wright keeps on file his report cards from his first years in school.

They are consistent. "Peter is im-



mature, very often in mischief, capable of better work, does not listen to the teacher, is too free with his fists, reverses figures and letters, needs to improve his concentration, has to be spoken to frequently, wastes time," were some of the comments.

"I was extremely hyperactive," Wright said. When he was in about the third grade, a friend of his parents' who was doing graduate work in a psychology program asked to test Peter. He was testing friends' children as part of a class requirement.

"It was just by chance but he picked up some bizarre problems. I

had a high IQ but I was a low achiever. There was lots of scatter [widely varying scores]." He recommended a full educational evaluation from a diagnostician as well as a neurological and a psychological evaluation."

Wright said his parents followed their friend's recommendations and more testing showed that Peter had dyslexia.

He could barely read. He often reversed both his writing and his speech. His speech was disorganized and often even garbled.

Intensive remediation was recommended. Peter saw a tutor every day after school for two years. He also attended a summer camp in Vermont for children with dyslexia. And he was put on Ritalin, still used today as a drug approach to calming hyperactive children.

School was one long hassle for Wright.

His background has made him an unusual lawyer with unusual understanding of and empathy for what is rapidly becoming a new branch of law. Few lawyers are as well-equipped to handle the legal cases that are developing as a result of Public Law 94-142.

It isn't in the least unusual for Wright to receive telephone calls and letters from around the country, either from frustrated parents or other lawyers who have heard about Wright and seek his help in this new area of law that Wright calls "education problems."

Obviously, since Public Law 94-142 was passed only eight years ago, there has not been a lot of time for lawyers to have experience with it or for a great wealth of precedents to have been set. But that is changing quickly, too.

Wright is a subscriber to "Education for the Handicapped Law Report," a national review of cases and their results involving the law which provides for education for the handicapped. These cases have accumulated with such rapidity that Wright's volumes are thick and heavy. They are, however, invaluable in the growing number of "education problem" cases that Wright is handling.

He has become an expert in the area of education law. He is well-known to local and state educators. He is quite knowledgeable about the workings of most of the local school systems and how they handle special education. He has represented parents in cases before most of the area school administrations and many outside the Richmond area as well.

Not only does his own experience with dyslexia come in handy in helping resolve special education loggers between parents and school administrations but his background as a psychologist also is helpful. He has an undergraduate degree in psychology from Randolph-Macon College and 30 hours of graduate work in psychology with emphasis in counseling from Virginia Commonwealth University. He received his law degree from the T.C. Williams School of Law at the University of Richmond.

"When a psychologist starts talking about standard deviation, I know exactly what they're talking about," Wright said.

When Wright accompanies a parent to a hearing involving a request for services from a public school system, there is no doubt that Wright knows what he is talking about. He assuredly rattles off the names of tests and test results and isn't about to be intimidated or confused by figures that can be exasperating to the inexperienced.

Wright said he would not want his law practice to be devoted entirely to education cases. "Then you would lose touch with everything else." But his concerns about the problems of the learning disabled run deep. His memories of his childhood and all those report cards that cited his behavior failings and his difficulty in learning are still vivid to him.

"I became an emotional dropout. I felt stupid and I had trouble getting along with my peers. I remember having my written work made fun of by teachers in front of the class."

The dyslexia isn't gone. "It's a compensatory type of thing. I have to constantly organize and reorganize myself to stay on task.

"I lip read all the time. If people talk with their hands over their mouths, I ask them to move them. I

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don't rely on my memory. I dictate or take copious notes."

Wright believes his learning disability is genetic. His grandfather "made a million but he couldn't read or write." His 11-year-old son has a visual perception problem. But after help, Wright says, the boy is "doing exceptionally."

As a board member of the Virginia Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, Wright has been active in this association that seeks to aid parents and children in obtaining special education services. He is frequently called on to speak at meetings or conventions as an example of one who has overcome learning difficulties and gone on to be a success.

Wright handled 77 education problem cases last year and he won about 80 percent of them. He laughed. "It's not really a win or lose situation. It's often just a modification of something. . . . One out of every four consultations leads to a case," Wright said.

When a parent calls him to object to the school's classification of a child as retarded, when the parents feel sure the child is either learning disabled or emotionally disturbed, Wright first asks for testing.

If there is a discrepancy between the results that the outside examiners obtained and those of the school, Wright then asks for an outside evaluation of the test results. If all testing shows that the child is mentally retarded, then Wright informs the parents that the placement in a special education program is, apparently, appropriate. Otherwise, he proceeds with requesting a due process hearing for re-evaluation of the case, an official process provided for by Public Law 94-142.

*TOMORROW: Awareness of the learning disabled has come a long way, but much still needs to be done.*