

best to define a child with a learning disability as “any learner who fails to benefit from an existing curriculum into which he has been placed.”² If that prescription were followed, attaching the label to a child would be without controversy, and the wrangling and hours of dubious assessments dedicated to establishing the label’s authenticity could be spent elsewhere. There’s a secondary gain as well, one that could easily be considered the primary winner. The obvious intervention would be plain, incontrovertible, and applicable to virtually all the same labeled pupils: assess the child’s academic entering skills, and modify the curriculum, both its content and its delivery. We could do exactly that when we first noticed a child struggling with his school work. Waiting for those struggles to worsen before we stepped in would be a gross error of the past. Supporting such an attitude, we were once similarly advised by a prominent psychologist: “We could forgo a categorical approach [and adopt] a fully dimensional, ... complaint-oriented approach [that] would better reflect the evidence.”³

Today, given our recurrent debates about diagnostic classification and school-related disorders, it doesn’t appear as if we’re inclined to accept either reformist’s suggestion toward the adoption of a non-categorical assistance delivery system that’s based on needs, not labels. In its place, we’re left with what we have: special education’s severely stressed eligibility system. That reality leads us to another discouraging certainty, specifically, our present funding limitations.

Considering our political priorities, and the way we educate our students, we’re precluded from providing timely, effective services to all academically and behaviorally struggling children. Since we likely agree that no truly needy youngster should be excluded for any reason from resource services, and since our restricted dollars need to be used as efficiently as possible, it’s incumbent upon special education, for its own credibility, and school psychology, because of its diagnostic role, to possess a valid and reliable means to determine which children should be designated eligible for added assistance. A while back, the fear was expressed that if the two fields failed to discriminate accurately, a band of imposters would occupy most of special education’s classroom desks, requiring that we turn away the rightful tenants.

A number of teachers will note readily that many, possibly most, of the “learning disabled” students enrolled in their programs do not satisfy either the 1977 USOE or the NJCLD definition. This is because, in many school districts, all students who are thought to be able to profit from tutoring or remedial education are arbitrarily called learning disabled. As a consequence

of such definitional liberality, the learning disability programs have become glutted with underachieving students, culturally different students, and poorly taught students.⁴

We can't have that, can we?

Whether we possess such a valid and reliable means to make accurate eligibility decisions continues to be argued. While the *expectation* of such accuracy prevails, certainly among parents with needy children, eligibility decisions are compromised by factors that are beyond a diagnostician's ability to mitigate.

Being declared eligible for special education services [has] less to do with the difficulties the child [is] experiencing with his or her school work, and more to do with the state and school district in which the youngster live[s].⁵ When school districts have plenty of money to spend on educating students with disabilities, diagnostic personnel are encouraged to locate and identify as many students with handicaps as possible. When funds are limited, concerns grow about the large numbers of students being declared handicapped.⁶

The latter reality drew a warning from a 1990s note issued by a special education director:

Special education is often the only available program for students needing some kind of classroom help. However, we must keep in mind that only students who are handicapped and in need of special education can be placed. Any student who does not meet the criteria is illegally placed and when we are monitored, we will have to pay back any funds collected for an ineligible student. We can't afford to do this. Overall our numbers have increased by over 300 and we have added no more teachers. We cannot afford inappropriate placements, nor should we be labeling students as handicapped who are not.⁷

Budgetary matters, however, are the least problematic component that affects accurate identification of children with educational disabilities, one in particular that's especially daunting. Educational diagnosticians, when exploring core causes for a child's classroom difficulties, aren't measuring easily observed entities such as bacteria or white blood cells that lend themselves to numbers and precise communication. It's one thing to suggest that a defective heart has curtailed a child's athleticism. It's another to suggest that the same child's reading prowess is less than that of his classmates because of an educational disability known as "dyslexia." One offered explanation carries as a backup a series of lab markers. The other