



## Reading and Learning Disabilities

### Position Paper of the Learning Disabilities Association of America

*Approved June 1996 and Updated April 2001*

**LDA is concerned about the numbers of individuals with learning disabilities who have not learned to read and are currently not learning to read in school.** According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1 in 5 American adults is functionally illiterate. Three-fourths of the unemployed lack sufficient skills to function successfully in the nation's work force. There are many reasons for illiteracy - one cause is neurologically-based learning disabilities which have not been recognized and/or dealt with appropriately.

Many children, including children with learning disabilities, do not learn to read in the first grade because they lack the basic readiness skills or the school's method is not appropriate for them. They may be allowed to fail for two or three years without effective intervention. Unless these children are identified early and appropriate instruction provided they may be passed along in school until basic reading instruction is no longer available. Quality reading programs must be available across the age range if we are to significantly reduce illiteracy. While accommodations may be appropriate, they must not be substituted for direct reading instruction.

Common educational practice is for schools and adult literacy programs to adopt a single method for teaching reading, with the assumption that it will be effective for everyone. Research indicates that some students with learning disabilities need a multisensory phonics approach, with instruction in phonological awareness; some students need a more meaning-based approach; while other students need interventions to address comprehension problems. For many students a combination of approaches is effective. **LDA EMPHASIZES THAT NO SINGLE READING METHOD WILL BE EFFECTIVE FOR ALL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES.**

As expressed in 1996, LDA continues to believe that illiteracy is a national crisis. It is LDA's position that to effect a significant increase in reading achievement for all people the following elements must be in place:

- a variety of methods for teaching reading in schools (in regular and special education) and in adult literacy programs,
- intensive teaching of reading, written language, and spelling in elementary and secondary schools,
- screening and diagnostic programs to identify students with reading disabilities,
- evaluation of program effectiveness that goes beyond mandated periodic testing,
- teacher certification requirements for elementary, secondary and special education teachers include substantive courses in reading methodologies,

- individualized reading programs for students with learning disabilities, and
- a strong commitment to research which will identify causes/prevention of reading failure and effective interventions.

Data reported in 2001 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) indicates that 20% of elementary school students are at risk for reading failure and of that number, 5-10% of those students have difficulty learning to read despite reading instruction that is successful for most students. LDA believes that these are students with learning disabilities who require more individualized reading programs that are specially designed to help them succeed.

LDA supports the current efforts at both the federal and state levels to strengthen reading instruction in the early school grades by:

- improving teacher competence in teaching reading,
- using careful diagnostic reading assessments,
- providing reading instruction that is research-based; and
- implementing data-based evaluation of student reading achievement.

However, it must also be reemphasized that such programs *will not meet the educational needs of all children.*

Some children in the early grades will require more intensive, highly individualized instruction from specifically trained teacher specialists in order to learn to read. Many students who acquire basic reading skills will have difficulty understanding, organizing, and retaining content information that they read. Other students will encounter problems in speaking, writing, spelling, and mathematics that impact life skills, post-secondary education, and workplace success. **For many students with learning disabilities, basic reading skills are a necessary, but not sufficient base upon which to build lifelong success.**

The variety of new local, state, and national initiatives that seek to improve early reading skills in all students can be an important approach to improving the academic skills of individuals with learning disabilities. Those same initiatives, however, should not be expected to:

- markedly reduce the number of students identified as having learning disabilities,
- justify elimination of the specific learning disabilities category under IDEA, or
- reduce the "cost burden" of special education at any of these levels.

LDA reiterates its recognition that reading is crucial to success in school, to realizing one's potential, and to becoming a productive member of society. Therefore, every person must be given the opportunity to learn to read. LDA also reiterates its expectation *that appropriate reading programs must be available to students at all ages... it is never too late to learn to read.*