



Private Options to Help Students Read



by Lisa Snell

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about the author

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Executive Summary

The number of students with disabilities served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) continues to increase at a rate higher than both the general population and school enrollment. Overall for the past 10 years, the number of students served under IDEA has increased 29 percent. This compares with an increase in population for three-through 21-years old of 8 percent and an increase in estimated school enrollment of 14 percent. Currently, special education costs the nation about \$35 billion, with some estimates running closer to \$60 billion.

In the early 1990s, some public schools began relying on private remedial-education providers such as Sylvan Learning Systems and Kaplan Educational Services to serve remedial-education students. The private remedial-education companies have had success raising student achievement for poor readers in public Title I programs. More recently, these private remedial-education providers have also helped special-education students with learning disabilities raise their performance on standardized tests.

Learning disabilities, or LDs, account for over 51 percent of all children in special education. A large proportion (about 80 percent) of learning disabilities involve reading problems. The U.S. Department of Education has acknowledged that many remedial-education students are mislabeled as special-education students. Numerous studies show that the longer individual students remain in special education

the lower the student's reading ability when compared to other poor readers.

Poor readers and LD students would benefit from similar types of reading interventions. Researchers argue that one-to-one tutoring is the most effective type of intervention for any child experiencing reading problems. Public school Title I programs have seen significant increases in student achievement by contracting with private remedial-education companies for reading interventions. School contracting for private remedial instruction is very close to a tutoring model and focuses on the individual poor reader.

Private remedial-education companies have also provided reading services to special-education students on a limited basis. Special-education students completing a Sylvan program for the 1999-2000 school year in Compton, Calif., for example, made substantial gains in reading, according to the Sat-9 test administered by the school district and Sylvan's standardized California Achievement Test (CAT). On the Sat-9 special-education students in Compton gained an average of 11 Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs, which are not equivalent to percentage points but are a common standard for measuring student progress) in vocabulary, eight NCEs in comprehension, and 11 NCEs overall in reading. On Sylvan's CAT test the special-education students gained 18 NCEs in vocabulary, eight NCEs in comprehension, and 13 NCEs in total reading. The U.S. Department of Education considers a gain of two NCEs acceptable improvement and a gain of seven exemplary.

Currently special education costs the nation about \$35 billion, with some estimates running closer to \$60 billion.

Introduction

Special education and Title I, which provides remedial education for disadvantaged students, are the two education programs the federal government spends the most money on. Despite the huge investment of federal dollars (and in the case of special education state dollars as well), both programs have poor track records in terms of student achievement. A large percentage of students in both programs have difficulty reading.

In the early 1990s, some public schools began relying on private remedial-education providers such as Sylvan Learning Systems and Kaplan Educational Services to serve disadvantaged students. Sylvan Learning Systems, for example, enrolls nearly 80,000 students in 850 public and nonpublic schools, often serv-

ing the worst-performing students. The private remedial-education companies have had success raising student achievement for poor readers in public Title I programs. More recently, these private remedial-education providers have also helped special-education students raise their performance on standardized tests.

The number of students with disabilities served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) continues to increase at a rate higher than both the general population and school enrollment. Overall for the past 10 years, the number of students served under IDEA has increased 29 percent (see Table 1). This compares with an increase in population for three-through 21-years old of 8 percent and an increase in estimated school enrollment of 14 percent.¹ Currently, special education costs the

nation about \$35 billion, with some estimates running closer to \$60 billion.²

The largest category of special education is known as “specific learning disabilities.” Learning disabilities, or LDs, account for over 51 percent of all children in special education. A large proportion (about 80 percent) of learning disabilities involve reading problems.³

Numerous studies show that the longer individual students remain in special education the lower the student’s reading ability when compared to other poor readers. As education researchers Louise Spear-Swerling and Robert J. Sternberg explain in *Off Track: When Poor Readers Become “Learning Disabled:”*

Labeling poor readers as LD and putting them in the special-education system actually may aggravate some of the negative consequences of poor reading. . . .

Poor readers in special education may be particularly likely to suffer decreases in practice, to benefit less from instructional interaction with a teacher, to engage in unmotivating instructional activities, and to draw maladaptive conclusions about what reading is.⁴

Education researchers Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen found that poor readers in special education programs received less instructional time in reading than did regular-classroom students or Title I (the federal government’s remedial education program) students.⁵ An October 2000 report by The Council for Exceptional Children found that special education classes are in “crisis” because disabled children will not get an ad-

equate education.⁶ The report was based on a survey of 900 special education teachers who self-reported about their special-education classrooms. The report noted that most of the teachers reported spending less than one hour a week of one-on-one time with individual special education students.⁷

The federal government defines LD as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.”⁸ To help prevent the misuse of the definition, the federal regulations stipulate that a diagnostic team shall identify as LD those students who show a “severe discrepancy” between their achievement in one or more subject areas and their intelligence, usually as measured by an IQ test. For example, a child who scores much lower on standardized tests of reading ability than on standardized tests of intelligence might be viewed as showing a reading disability.

Even with these achievement-intelligence discrepancy criteria, a diagnosis of LD is a subjective label. There are 50 state definitions for learning disabilities in addition to the federal one, and the methods used to determine intelligence vary wildly. According to University of Minnesota education researchers James Ysseldyke and Bob Algozzine, more than 80 percent of all school children in the United States could qualify as learning disabled under one definition or another.⁹ Different discrepancy score formulas generate dramatically different numbers of pupils “eligible” to be treated

Numerous studies show that the longer individual students remain in special education the lower the student’s reading ability.

SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS BY DISABILITY: NUMBER OF CHILDREN AGES 6 - 21 SERVED UNDER IDEA BY DISABILITY

Disability	1988-89	1997-98	Percent Change
Specific Learning Disabilities	1,995,186	2,756,046	38.1
Speech or Language Impairments	965,385	1,067,181	10.5
Mental Retardation	576,671	603,408	4.6
Emotional Disturbance	373,202	455,194	22
Multiple Disabilities	84,480	107,234	27
Hearing Impairments	57,117	69,672	22
Orthopedic Impairments	47,195	67,502	43
Other Health Impairments	50,321	191,153	279.8
Visual Impairments	22,461	26,070	16.1
Autism	-	42,511	n/a*
Deaf- Blindness	1,494	1,463	- 2.1
Traumatic Brain Injury	-	11,914	n/a**
Developmental Delay	-	1,944	n/a***
All Disabilities	4,173,512	5,401,292	29.4

*Category introduced in 1995. **Category introduced in 1991. ***Category introduced in 1997.
Source: *Twenty-first Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, April 2000).

as having a learning disability.¹⁰ For example, in one study the authors sampled 137 children and assessed whether they would be classified as having a learning disability according to five different common formulas: the percentages classified as having LD were 4, 9, 9, 14, and 28 percent of the sample.¹¹

Poor Readers or Learning Disabled?

The U.S. Department of Education has acknowledged that many remedial-education students are mislabeled as special-education students. Thomas Hehir, director of the Education Department's Office of Special Education, has stated that putting students in special education because there is no other alternative for providing remedial services is a widespread problem.¹²

Many researchers argue that the conventional way in which learning disabilities are defined and recognized—in terms of differences between IQ and reading skill—contributes to the over diagnosis of LD students.¹³

The argument is not so much that learning disabilities do not exist but that the way in which children are diagnosed is highly inaccurate. As Stanford Law Professor Mark Kelman and University of California Los Angeles Law Professor Gillian Lester explain in *Jumping the Queue*:

It is plausible that there truly are children with learning disabilities out in the world, but that our diagnostic techniques are so poor that a high proportion of children labeled as having LDs do not 'really' have them, while a significant number of those who actually have LDs are not so identified. There is a good deal of evidence that misclassification is rampant.¹⁴

For example, one study contrasted a group of fourth graders who had been labeled as having learning disabilities with a group of fourth graders with parallel academic achievement levels who had not been labeled. The researchers found significant similarities between the two groups; an average of 96 percent of the scores were in the common range, and the performance of the LD and the underachieving children on many subtests were identical.¹⁵ By comparing characteristics of these children with the federal definition for learning disabilities, the researchers concluded that as many as 40 percent of the students may have been misclassified. An extensive review of studies that compare dyslexics with the same age classmates who have substantially lower IQs found that in many cases it is difficult to find any distinctions between dyslexics and "garden variety" poor readers.¹⁶ A study in Colorado found that fewer than half of the sample of all children labeled as LD "had characteristics that are associated in federal law and professional literature with the definitions of learning disabilities."¹⁷

Distinguishing between reading disability and other kinds of poor reading is at best difficult.¹⁸

More than 80 percent of all school children in the United States could qualify as learning disabled under one definition or another.

One line of research has attempted to differentiate children with reading disability from "garden variety" poor readers. Poor readers, unlike children with a learning disability, should have a somewhat depressed IQ score that is commensurate with their low achievement in reading. In other words, garden-variety poor readers would have more generalized learning problems than children with learning disabilities. Children with a specific reading disability and garden-variety poor readers appear to be similar with regard to specific cognitive abilities related to reading—especially word recognition.¹⁹ Both groups seem to have a core of phonological deficits. In addition, there is currently little empirical basis for differentiating the two groups of poor readers in terms of the kinds of remedial programs they require. Programs developed for garden-variety poor readers might also be highly appropriate for children with a reading disability.²⁰

Numerous researchers have conducted studies comparing dyslexic readers and nondyslexic poor readers on a variety of cognitive processing tests. For example, Bennett Shaywitz and his colleagues compared the progress of diagnosed discrepancy-based dyslexics and garden-variety poor readers over time. They found few differences in their performance on any standardized tests.²¹

Minorities are Overrepresented

Despite the fact that the LD label is not meant to apply to children whose problems derive from poverty, large numbers of LD students are male, minority students who come from single-parent and low-income families. According to federal statistics, more than two-thirds of all special-education students are male. And although African Americans make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise 28 percent of special-education students.²²

The Office of Special Education Programs reports that between 1980 and 1990, African American children were placed in special education at more than twice the rate of whites. Hispanics fared even worse, with a 53 percent increase—compared to 6 percent for whites.²³ Based on a comprehensive review of studies, Spear-Swelling and Sternberg argue that in practice special education referral and placement tend to be determined by factors that may have little to do with a child's intrinsic abilities or disabilities. These factors include gender, race, and classroom behavior. They note, "Thus, a youngster who is a behavior problem in the classroom, and who also has reading difficulties, is especially likely to be referred for special help, whereas a youngster with an equally serious reading difficulty, who is quiet and compliant, may go unnoticed."²⁴

Treatment Should be the Same

Many researchers argue that despite the controversy over who is and who is not learning disabled, the treatment for special-education children and poor readers is virtually the same.²⁵ As Spear-Swelling and Sternberg observe²⁶:

Rather than exhibiting a unique syndrome of poor reading, children with RD [reading disability] are similar in many ways to garden-variety poor readers, who lack the IQ-achievement discrepancy that is central to the identification of reading disability. Both types of poor readers—those with the discrepancy and those without—appear to have similar instructional needs as well as similar cognitive profiles. . . .

Similarly, Kelman and Lester conclude that "there is a great deal of evidence that the prog-

nosis of students with and without LDs who start out with equal reading scores is the same, and that interventions are no more or less efficacious with either group. There is no substantial evidence in longitudinal studies that interventions benefit LD students more.”²⁷

Several studies suggest that when resources are focused on teaching low-achieving students to read, special-education referrals drop. For example, African-American students in Baltimore at a high risk of reading failure that were educated under Success For All—a widely used reading program that strives to improve reading for an entire school population—achieved far better scores than control group students.²⁸ Special education referral rates for Success For All graduates dropped dramatically.

Similarly, since New York City implemented new procedures for identifying students with learning problems and began giving them remedial reading help outside the context of special education, special-education referral rates have dropped significantly. For the 1998-1999 school year, special education referrals dropped 22 percent from the previous year, with 8,727 fewer students labeled as special education.²⁹ In addition, 5,500 special-education students were returned to their regular classroom. New York City has not abandoned these students. Instead, the school district has focused its resources on an after-school program called Project Read, which offers intensive remedial-reading instruction to 100,000 students. The reduction in special-education placements saved the New York school district up to \$40 million, which has been reinvested into general education and is used to fund the after-school tutoring program.³⁰

Private Alternatives to Special Education

The federal government admits that categorizing students as LD when there is no other alternative for providing remedial education is a widespread problem. And even when remedial education services are available, they often fail to help poor readers. Numerous studies document the failure of Title I, the federal government’s \$8 billion per year remedial education program to serve disadvantaged students.³¹

Poor readers and LD students would benefit from similar types of reading interventions. Spear-Swelling and Sternberg argue on the basis of several studies that one-to-one tutoring is the most effective type of intervention for any child experiencing reading problems.³² Public school Title I programs have seen significant increases in student achievement by contracting with private remedial-education companies for reading interventions. School contracting for private remedial instruction is very close to a tutoring model and focuses on the individual poor reader. Research shows that when private firms (such as Sylvan Learning Systems or Kaplan Educational Services) provide public remedial-education instruction, students completing the private programs score higher on standardized achievement tests than students completing traditional public-school remedial-education programs.³³

A. Student Outcomes

Sylvan Learning Systems and other private remedial-education companies have had success teaching the lowest-performing students how to read. In a national database of Sylvan

students, representing districts across the nation for the 1997-1998 school year, 75 percent of the students began the Sylvan program with California Achievement Test reading scores below the 25th percentile. The average gains for these bottom-quartile students were eight Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs, which are not equivalent to percentage points but are a common standard for measuring student progress).³⁴ The U.S. Department of Education considers two NCE gains significant. One Sylvan program started with 71 percent of the students as nonreaders. When reassessed after attending the Sylvan program 100 percent of the students were reading at some level. For example, only 23 percent of the students could identify lowercase letters on the Inventory of Beginning Abilities pretest. After the Sylvan program, 96.8 percent of students were able to identify the letters. Only 27 per-

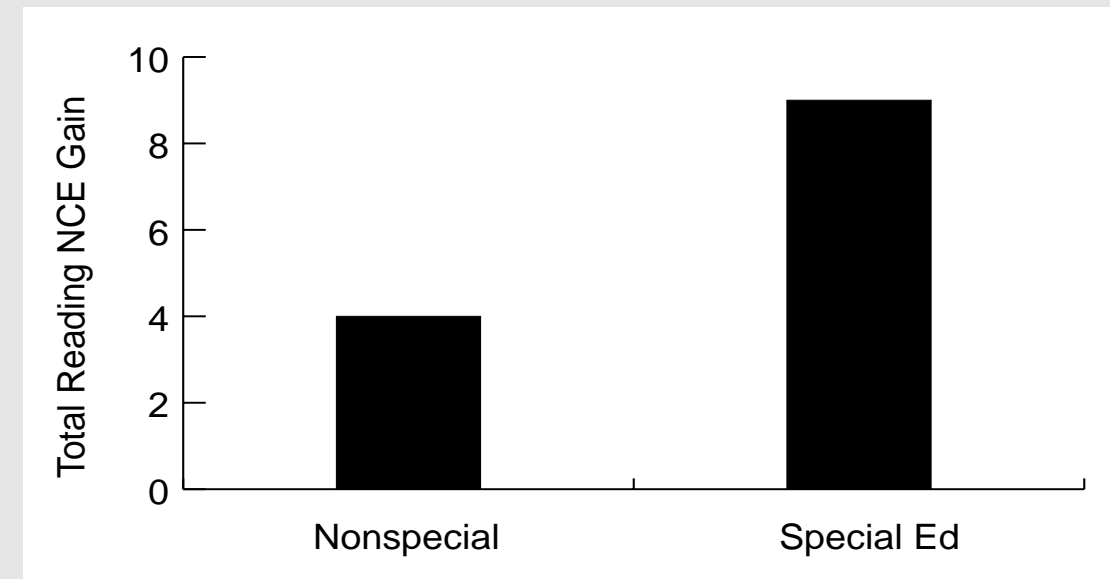
cent could identify long vowels on the Decoding Abilities Test. After the Sylvan program, 73.8 percent of the students were able to identify long vowels.³⁵

B. Contracting for Private Special-Education Services

Private remedial-education companies have also provided reading services to special-education students on a limited basis.

A Sylvan program for the 1999-2000 school year in Hawthorne, Calif. found that special education students made substantial progress in reading. During the year, student progress was assessed using the Hawthorne District’s standardized test, the SAT-9, as well as the Sylvan standardized test, the CAT-5. Special Education students exceeded the gains of non-

SAT TOTAL READING GAINS BY SPECIAL-ED STATUS
HAWTHORNE SYLVAN PROGRAM 1999-2000



Source: Hawthorne Unified School District, Sylvan Learning Systems, 2000.

Between 1980 and 1990, African American children were placed in special education at more than twice the rate of whites.

special Education students by 5 points, for a total NCE gain of nine (see figure 1).

Similarly, special-education students completing a Sylvan program for the 1999-2000 school year in Compton, Calif. also made substantial gains in reading, according to the Sat-9 test administered by the school district and Sylvan's standardized test (see figure 2 and 3). On the Sat special-education students in Compton gained an average of 11 NCEs in vocabulary, eight NCEs in comprehension, and 11 NCEs overall in reading. On Sylvan's CAT test the special education students gained 18 NCEs in vocabulary, eight NCEs in comprehension, and 13 NCEs in total reading.

Sylvan's results with special-education students are even better than the company's results with remedial-education students. The

Sylvan results were found on tests administered by the school district and on tests administered by Sylvan itself. The Sylvan results provide more support for the claim that special-education students respond best to one-on-one reading instruction.

Characteristics of Private Remedial and Special-education Programs

Unlike traditional special-education programs where students receive little individual attention, there are several notable program features of Sylvan-type programs that

are especially important for schools serving students with learning disabilities.

student not making readily observable progress.³⁷

A. Student Centered

An independent evaluation of Sylvan's program by researchers from Johns Hopkins University noted three significant characteristics of Sylvan's public-school programs:³⁶

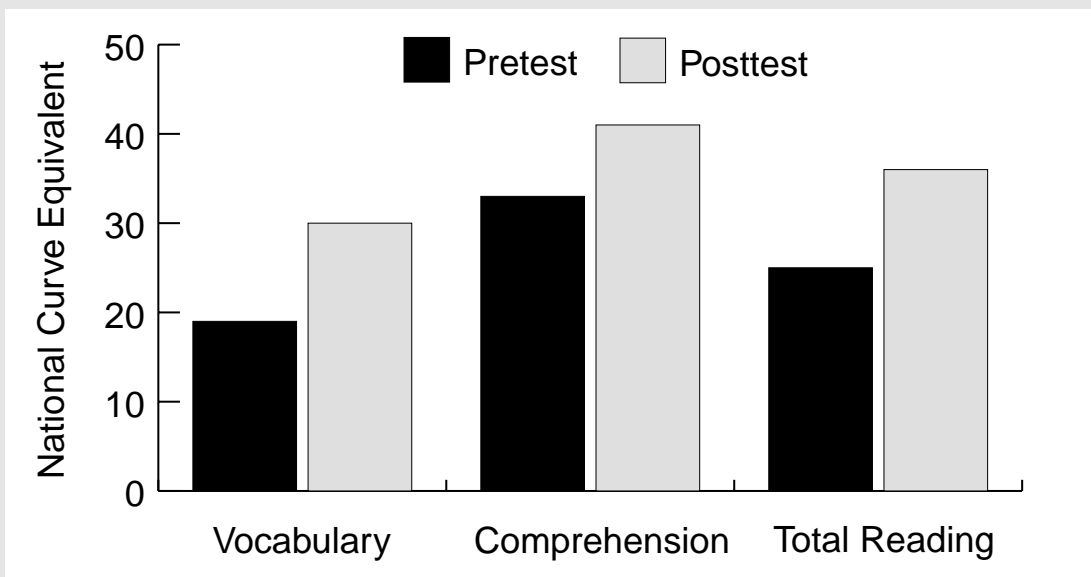
- A focus on student products;
- A system of gathering all of each student's products in a single, longitudinal file each year, which allowed the student, the parents, the teacher, and the administrator to have ready access to each child's progress on a real-time, reliable basis;
- A system commitment to regularly reviewing student progress, with discussions between multiple adults relative to any

As education researchers Martha MacIver and Sam Stringfield, authors of the Johns Hopkins study of Sylvan programs, concluded, "Unless schools are committed to systematically monitoring individual student progress on norm-referenced tests and implementing intervention strategies for those falling behind, it is unlikely that student achievement will improve."

B. Parent Involvement

Private remedial education companies schedule regular appointments with parents to review their child's progress. If face-to-face meetings are not possible, they confer with parents by phone or written report.

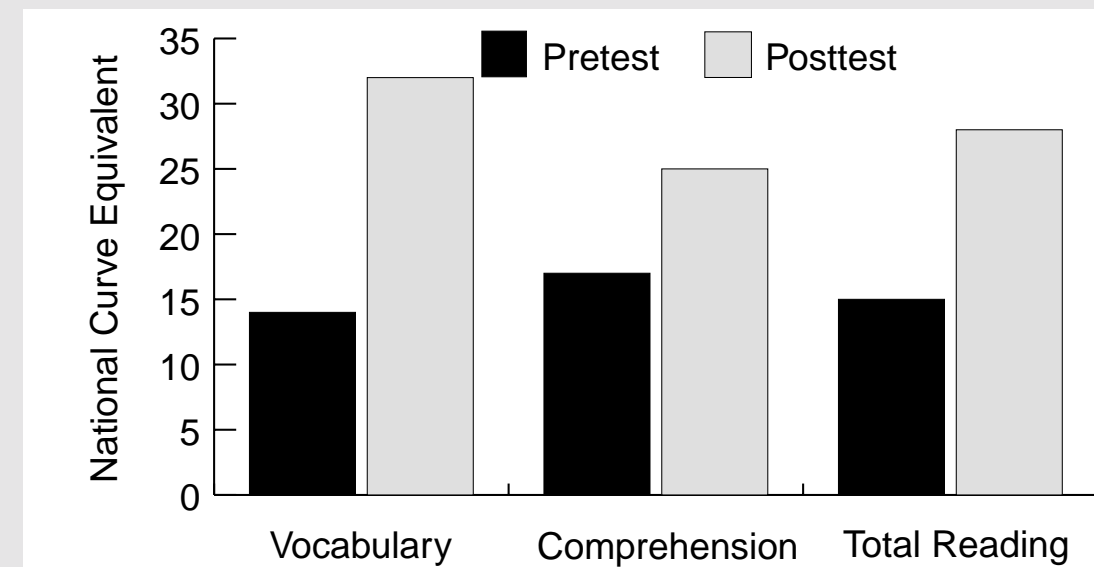
COMPTON SYLVAN PROGRAM, 1999-2000: SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' SAT NCE GAINS



Source: Compton Unified School District Sylvan Learning Systems, 2000.

figure 2

COMPTON SYLVAN PROGRAM, 1999-2000: SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' CAT NCE GAINS



Source: Compton Unified School District, Sylvan Learning Systems, 2000.

figure 3

C. Instructional Guarantees

Private companies usually guarantee increases in student achievement, or they offer additional instruction for free. Sylvan in School programs, for example, guarantee an average yearly achievement growth of five NCEs in the targeted content area after 64 hours of instruction.

D. Staff Development

Private remedial-education companies conduct extensive teacher training and often incorporate public-school staff into the process. Sylvan staff workshops include the Sylvan testing process; how it relates to the classroom; how three-to-one instruction is delivered; conferences with parents; and linkages between Sylvan and regular instruction.

E. Individual Diagnostic Assessment

Private remedial-education companies assess each student to gain information about a student's skill level. This assessment allows the teacher to develop an individualized learning plan for each student.

F. Innovative Reward Systems

Some private remedial-education programs use external rewards to motivate students. Sylvan has the Sylvan store in which students receive tokens they have earned for desirable merchandise such as movie tickets or radios.

G. Low Teacher-student Ratios

Private remedial-education instructors work with approximately three students to one

teacher to ensure that each student receives critical personal attention.

H. Competition

Private reading contracts have been competitively bid. Private remedial-education companies are constantly facing competition from other tutoring companies.

I. Economies of Scale

Private-education companies often have large economies of scale and expertise, resulting in lower costs than federal Title I programs, which have high administration costs.

Conclusion

Both poor readers and special-education students with a reading disability deserve a chance at intensive reading instruction. Strong evidence indicates that students diagnosed with learning disabilities have been unresponsive to the costly special education that has been provided to them in the public schools. Special-education students would benefit from private reading programs that focus on the individual student. Intensive reading instruction can reduce the number of children who are labeled as special education as well as help students already placed in the special-education category. Until the special-education intervention becomes a program focused on student outcomes with a funding system that allows public schools to use innovative reading programs to serve special-education students, some special-ed students will continue to be warehoused in often poorly performing special-ed classes. □

Other Related RPPI Studies

Remedial Education Reform: Private Alternatives to Traditional Title I, by Lisa Snell, Policy Study No. 266, January 2000.

Satellite Charter Schools: Addressing the School-Facilities Crunch through Public-Private Partnerships, by Richard C. Seder, Policy Study No. 256, April 1999.

Pennsylvania School Finance: Out of the Courts, Into the Legislature, by Richard C. Seder, Policy Brief, October 1998.

Bilingual Education: Reading, Writing & Rhetoric, by Richard C. Seder, Policy Brief, May 1998.

School Violence Prevention: Strategies to Keep Schools Safe, by Alexander Volokh and Lisa Snell, Policy Study No. 256, October 1997.

Alternative Teacher Organizations: Evolution of Professional Associations, by David W. Kirkpatrick, Policy Study No. 231, September 1997.

Charter School Innovations: Keys to Effective Charter Reform, by Theodor Rebarber, Policy Study No. 228, July 1997.

Meeting the Challenge: How the Private Sector Serves Difficult to Educate Students, by Janet Beales, Policy Study No. 212, August 1996.

Evidence shows that students with learning disabilities have not responded to the costly special education provided by public schools.

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- 2 Robert Worth, "The Scandal of Special Ed," *The Washington Monthly* (June 1999), p. 34.
- 3 Robert J. Sternberg and Elena L. Gigorenko, *Our Labeled Children* (Reading, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1999), p. 194.
- 4 Louise Spear-Swerling and Robert J. Sternberg, *Off Track: When Readers Become "Learning Disabled"* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p.132.
- 5 Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, "School Response to Reading Failure: Instruction for Chapter 1 and Special Education Students in Grades Two, Four, and Eight," *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 89 no.5 (1989), pp.529-542.
- 6 Elizabeth Kozleski, Richard Manzer, Don Deshler, *Bright Futures for Exceptional Learners: An Action Agenda to Achieve Quality Conditions for Teaching and Learning* (Reston, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, October 2000).
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- 31 For a full discussion of the shortcomings of the federal government's Title I program see Lisa Snell, *Remedial Education Reform: Private Alternatives to Traditional Title I*, Policy Study No. 266 (Los Angeles: Reason Public Policy Institute, January 2000).
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