

COMMENTARY

Allor: Early intervention is key to helping children read

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Despite a ban on social promotion, nearly 3,000 Texas third-graders who failed to pass a basic reading test are still moving ahead a grade, according to the Texas Education Agency.

The pressure is great to promote children for social reasons. Naturally, parents don't want their children to suffer the stigma of remaining behind their peers. And research clearly shows that retention does not help most students "catch up" and that it's the single most powerful predictor of whether a student will drop out of school.

In fact, neither social promotion nor retention is a good choice. A better solution is to prevent failure, avoiding retention altogether through intense intervention in the early grades. Research shows this is definitely possible.

Scientifically-based research — large-scale, random studies of students — has produced reliable data demonstrating that it is possible to virtually eliminate reading failure. The key is intervention, which requires that schools assess children early and pull aside struggling readers for small-group instruction with a specific curriculum for up to 45 minutes a day. Several studies have shown that with this type of strong support in the first grade, at least 98 percent of first-graders will develop sufficient literacy skills to prepare them for success in later grades. These studies involve children from all backgrounds, including those in poverty, second-language learners and even those with dyslexia.

Compared to other states, Texas is making great strides in improving early reading. Since 1999, the state has spent more than \$500 million on teacher training and reading programs. One is the Teacher Reading Academy, which has exposed more than 100,000 elementary school teachers to new research on effective ways to teach reading and writing. Many of these teachers have not received this type of training before. They learn how to incorporate each of the basic elements of literacy instruction into an effective program.

These elements include phonological awareness, alphabetic understanding, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary, all of which have been identified by a national reading panel as key principles children need to know if they are to become competent readers. Sessions also incorporate successful strategies for teaching written expression and accommodating the needs of diverse learners.

Texas can still do better. The same Texas Education Agency report that found widespread social promotion also reported that 6.4 percent of first-graders were retained in the 2003-04 school year. This number is at least three times larger than it would have been if students had received intensive early intervention. Moreover, since learning to read only gets more difficult with each passing year, about 85 percent of these children, or 18,000, will probably never learn to read sufficiently.

Think of them as 18,000 young adults unable to study for a trade or profession, many of whom would be unable to even complete a job application. When you think of the revenue lost in the taxes these adults will never pay, not to mention the tax money required to care for their basic needs, the cost of early intervention is an extremely wise investment.

This will require a strong commitment to classroom teachers. They need access to ongoing professional development to ensure that research-based techniques become a routine part of classroom instruction. Districts and schools must help teachers identify struggling readers. Also, extra teachers are needed to provide intense intervention to the most at-risk students. We now know that even students with dyslexia benefit from carefully implemented, daily intervention.

Although these advances are exciting news, translating this research into common practice poses a tremendous challenge. Leaving no child behind is not easy, but leaving 18,000 behind in just one year is unconscionable when we know what to do to prevent it.

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