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My third grader still can't read. What do I do?



Anthony Jenkins/The Globe and Mail

School systems invariably say they could do better if only they had more money. The evidence says otherwise

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Malkin Dare has seen it time and time again. A 9- or 10-year-old comes to her for tutoring. He's miserable and defeated. And then, as early as the second lesson, the light begins to dawn. "I can *do* this." The kid is learning to read.

"It makes a huge difference to them in everything," says Ms. Dare. "Someone asked the mother of one boy I tutored why he was suddenly playing hockey so much better. It was because he'd learned to read."

Want to know who won't graduate from high school? It's the kids who're still struggling with reading in Grade 3. "The research is very clear," says Julia O'Sullivan, dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. She calls reading the "golden key" that separates the haves from the have-nots. And too many kids don't have it.

In a report released last week by the Canadian Education Statistics Council, Prof. O'Sullivan, one of the co-authors, estimates that, by the end of Grade 6, at least 30 per cent of Canadian students can't read or write well enough to succeed in school. That's a stunning number.

Here's another. After commissioning an exhaustive report on literacy skills, Statistics Canada concluded last year that only 21 per cent of young adults between 15 and 25 have achieved a level of literacy "needed by adults to participate fully and fairly in the knowledge economy."

How can this be? Why, after years of literacy campaigns, standardized testing, smaller class sizes and more literacy coaches, not to mention inspiring photos of premiers reading storybooks to tiny tots, are so many kids still unable to pass a basic reading test?

Most Finnish kids learn to read by Grade 6, so why don't ours? Are the tests wrong? Are the kids just too dumb to learn? Or is the education system too dumb to teach them?

After consulting the parents' guide published by the Ontario Literacy Secretariat, I'm going for the third explanation. It left me with the distinct impression that "literacy" is not so much about the ability to read and write as it is about diversity and social justice.

"The meaning of the word 'literacy' is constantly evolving," the guide says. "Your child's teacher may refer to 'critical literacy.' This is a way of thinking critically with a focus on questions of fairness, equity, and social justice." And so on. If only it told you how to help your kid sound out "the cat sat on the mat."

Parents get endless advice about making reading fun. But reading can't be fun if your child lacks the basic skills. "We're still assuming kids are getting first-class instruction in school," says Ms. Dare, who is president of the Society for Quality Education. The group is a long-time critic of current reading instruction, which has largely ditched phonics in favour of something called "balanced literacy."

Current teaching methods, Ms. Dare argues, are especially hard on boys, because boys have a harder time connecting sounds to symbols than girls do. That's why they lag behind girls in reading. And if a child doesn't pick it up by Grade 1 or 2, he's out of luck, because teachers don't teach reading skills after that.

But don't blame teachers. They have very little training. Although reading is the foundation skill for everything else, most teacher candidates get only 24 to 36 hours of instruction in teaching reading, according to Prof. O'Sullivan. She says they need 180 hours. "The expertise required to teach reading is incredible." She believes that any child who can't read and write adequately by Grade 7 should get intensive help until he can. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

Teachers desperately want to help their students succeed. But they have no benchmarks. There are no common criteria that lay out in concrete terms what good reading and writing look like at various grade levels. Ask the teacher about your child's level of proficiency, and she honestly may not know.

Absurdly, there is a lot of research on effective reading methods. Direct instruction in alphabetic coding (i.e. phonics) is the gold standard. Keith Stanovich, a world authority on reading, calls this finding "one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioural science." Yet this method is heavily discouraged in many jurisdictions, including Ontario.

School systems invariably say they could do better if only they had more money. The evidence says otherwise. Ontario's education budget has increased by 30 per cent in the past six years,

while enrolment has fallen by 5 per cent. Yet, roughly a third of kids still can't read well enough to succeed in high school. If any business had that kind of track record, it wouldn't be in business any more.

Your kids, of course, will probably be fine. If they get stuck, you'll just send them to somebody like Malkin Dare. But what about the kids who won't be fine? What excuses will we offer them?

The Society for Quality Education offers a free remedial reading program that includes a quick assessment test. You can access it through its website, www.societyforqualityeducation.org.