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Editorial Comment: 1984 is Not Just a Number

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

1984 IS NOT JUST A NUMBER

A young teacher called long distance to tell us that the results of her Gates-McGinitie indicated her students had made no progress during the previous semester. We protested, saying she couldn't make such assumptions on the basis of one-shot test results. She said her federal aid money is tied to the progress shown by reading classes in her charge. "If the government says progress must be measured." She asked, "what can I do?"

Have we put ourselves into the position of discouraging good teaching by this sort of purse-string regulatory activity? A good teacher is a guide, an inspiration, and an influence on a child's attitude. If our governmental agencies perceive the teaching of reading as only decoding and recall, teachers and students of this generation are in deep trouble.

Reading *must* be thought of as experiencing print, and students *must* be helped to live that experience with regard to human relations. As we examine and reflect on experiences, we develop our system of values. Wisdom and good judgment come from informed comparisons and guided evaluations of the lessons of experience, both real and vicarious.

Parents, taking their cues from perceived government policy, are spreading the trend toward adversarial relationships. A sad little event of a few years ago remains stuck crossways in memory. Al, a sixteen-year-old, needed help in reading, and the reading teacher offered to work with him during school time. The parents wanted to know why their son had "lost his study hall period." Explaining that Al was reading three years below expectancy, the teacher said that with help during study hall, Al could make significant gains. The parents refused permission to let the young man leave study hall, claiming their son would be "labeled as retarded." Al eventually left school without graduating, still reading below his mental ability.

Enlightened parents and controlling agencies should know that teaching reading and reading improvement is a job of human relations, of friendly, positive endeavor. Agencies, parents, and administrators must be educated to understand that teaching reading cannot be effective unless young people are guided to a point of *readiness* in their attitude, for active learning. They have to trust their teacher. They have to be taught to trust in themselves. Only then can reading help the young person to mature, to find his directions, to relate to others, and to make realistic plans for the future. Constructive human relations, humanism in education, must precede the study of sentence meaning and comparison of ideas in print. A test to measure a teacher's influence on students' willingness to learn has not been devised. Repeated efforts to measure student progress in percentile points can only lead to the loss of the very elements required for teaching reading: optimism, mutual trust, and positive atmosphere.

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Editor