Don’t mix metaphors
I respect Dr. Penso’s frustration with the barriers within systems, which seem to be allowed to persist for illogical rationale (AAP News, March 1997). Yet, I suggest that Dr. Penso might become better acquainted with the challenges that head lice infestations present to school systems before further use of this metaphor.

It is public health regulation which dictates to schools that children with infestations must be excluded until symptom-free. There is no other health condition which seems to create greater chaos in the school system than does head lice. If we could capture the power of this small critter has, we would have no bureaucratic problems. Repeatedly, parents become volatile to the extreme of making death threats to school nurses and school staff over this issue. Innumerable hours are spent screening, educating, and providing family support to manage statistically few head lice infestations in the general school population.

Chronic infestations are merely a symptom of deeper pathology in home environments – poor hygiene practices, limited cognitive and coping skills, financial constraints. This “benign” condition can be the precipitator for high-risk behaviors in students chronically infested with head lice. Gang and drug involvement, teen pregnancy and school drop out frequently start with chronic school absenteeism, which may be associated with chronic head lice infestation. So many students are at risk in functional and dysfunctional families for poisoning from the misuse of shampoo pesticides.

There are repeated anecdotal reports about concern of treatment failures. Efforts are made by alternative providers to try to remedy this supposed ineffective treatment. Yet, no funding can be obtained to do current research about these questions. Treatment of head lice is not a “fast-food service.” But product information leads people to believe that head lice shampoo will quickly kill lice and eradicate the nits. Treatment takes energy, effort and persistence.

There is a lack of ability, in many areas, to collaborate with medical providers about a united front for this challenge. School nurses across the nation would be grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with physicians, pharmacists, researchers and educators toward a solution, so that indeed we can spend our time with helping the chronically ill, the medically fragile and the technology-dependent children at school.

I invite you, and all pediatricians, to connect with your local school nurse today to see how together we might make a difference in the management of this health condition.

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Advocate expanded role
We have significant concerns about Dr. Cunningham’s dismissal of the role of pediatricians in the evaluation of a child with a learning disability (AAP News, January 1997). If his sole intent was to shock, then his purpose was served. The statement, “They don’t have a role,” certainly caught our attention, and we beg to differ with this opinion.

Dr. Cunningham forgets the important roles of the pediatrician as surveillor for any developmental concern, as well as diagnostician, case manager and trusted family advisor. The purpose of an evaluation to “rule-out” learning disabilities is to identify potential problems and make appropriate diagnoses first. Surely Dr. Cunningham must be aware of the extensive list of differential diagnoses that may either mimic or coexist with learning disorders. The pediatrician is often in the unique and central position of having knowledge about the child’s health and developmental profile, family background, social circumstances and stressors, which may impact upon a child’s learning capabilities and behavior in school. Who better than the pediatrician to play a vital role in the “diagnosis of a learning disability?”

Dr. Cunningham unnecessarily limits himself to an arbitrary definition of learning disability based on a discrepancy between IQ and academic achievement. This discrepancy model often does not determine diagnosis. It only determines...