



## ***Dyslexia Education: A Critical Equity Issue for NYC Students***

### **Downtown Independent Democrats Resolution in Support of Implementation of Early Screening, Curriculum Development, Teacher Training, Programs and Schools To Support and Teach Children with Dyslexia in NYC Public Schools and**

#### **Whereas:**

- 1. The NYC Department of Education has failed to develop early screening, curriculum, teacher training, programs and schools to support and teach children with dyslexia, creating a deeply inequitable system that is out of reach for the vast majority of New York City families;***
- Dyslexia affects as many as 5-20% of the population, regardless of primary language or background, and represents 80 to 90% of all those with learning disabilities<sup>1</sup>;
- Dyslexia is a learning disability that is neurological in origin, characterized by difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading, but also spelling, writing and pronouncing words and is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities<sup>1</sup>;
- Left untreated, dyslexia increases the risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, peer rejection,<sup>2</sup> and absenteeism,<sup>3</sup> and as a result, children with undiagnosed dyslexia are more likely to drop out of school and as adults have higher rates of unemployment, anxiety and depression<sup>4</sup> and become involved with the criminal justice system<sup>5</sup>;

<sup>1</sup> <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-basics/> and <http://dyslexia.yale.edu/dyslexia/what-is-dyslexia/>.

<sup>2</sup> Haft, S. L., Myers, C. A., & Hoefft, F., (2016). *Preventing bullying through science, policy, and practice*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi: 10.17226/23482 and Mayo Clinic, [mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dyslexia/symptoms-causes/syc-20353552](http://mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dyslexia/symptoms-causes/syc-20353552).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2016, October 27). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: An unprecedented look at a hidden educational crisis*.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Lamki L. (2012). *Dyslexia: Its impact on the Individual, Parents and Society*. *Sultan Qaboos University medical journal*, 12(3), 269–272.

<sup>5</sup> A 2016 study indicates that more than a third or more of incarcerated youth have learning disabilities and a 2000 study of Texas prisoners found that nearly half were dyslexic. See Mizrahi, J. L., Jeffers, J., Ellis, E. B., & Pauli, P. (2016). *Disability and criminal justice reform: Keys to Success*. Rockville, MD: RespectAbility and

5. The achievement gap between typical and dyslexic readers impacts students as early as first grade and persists and often worsens over time making addressing the needs of dyslexic students a critical education and equity issue;
  - a. NYC DOE observes that students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are likely to have very poor reading outcomes after, and while academic recovery can still occur at any grade or age, the chances are lowered if grade-level reading has not occurred at this point<sup>6</sup>;
  - b. In NYC, only 19% and 18% of NYC Students with Disabilities<sup>7</sup> (SWD) passed 4th grade state math and ELA exams, respectively, one of the lowest performing demographic groups, dropping to 10% and 12%, respectively, by 7th grade<sup>8</sup>;
  
6. Currently, the DOE has few and inconsistent systems to address the needs of students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities, including:
  - a. Screening in grades K-2<sup>9</sup> allowing dyslexic children to be identified sooner and receive interventions and accommodations needed to succeed in school;
  - b. Curricula based on the Orton-Gillingham (OG) Approach to teaching literacy that is multisensory, structured, sequential, cumulative, cognitive and flexible<sup>10</sup>, examples of OG programs for reading include Preventing Academic Failure, Barton, Landamood Bell, Recipe for Reading, Alphabetic Phonics, Wilson Foundations and Wilson Reading, SPIRE, and for writing include Judith Hochman's

Moody KC, Holzer CE 3rd, Roman MJ, Paulsen KA, Freeman DH, Haynes M, James TN. (2000). *Prevalence of Dyslexia Among Texas Prison Inmates*. Tex Med.

<sup>6</sup> Friedman, Ester Klein, Ph.D., Executive Director, Literacy and AIS Division of Teaching and Learning. (2014.) *Indicators for Successful Reading Acquisition*. NYC Department of Education.

<sup>7</sup> Students with Disabilities (SWD) are 20% of the NYC public school population and are defined as those students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

<sup>8</sup> 2018 ELA and Math results for 4th grade students in NYC, in aggregate and by race, sex, disability, economic status and English language learner status, are available at <http://infohub.nyced.org/reports-and-policies/citywide-information-and-data/test-results>.

<sup>9</sup> Low cost screening tests include the [Shaywitz Dyslexia Screen](#), developed by Dr. Sally Shaywitz with the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, the [Colorado Learning Disabilities Questionnaire-Reading Subscale School Age Screener](#) and [others](#).

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orton-Gillingham> and <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/instructional-strategies/orton-gillingham-what-you-need-to-know>.

- Teaching Basic Writing Skills, The Writing Revolution and Self-Regulated Strategy Development;
  - c. Teacher training to recognize early signs of dyslexia, screen students and effectively teach OG-based curricula; and,
  - d. Programs designed for dyslexic students that combine OG-trained staff and curricula with low student-teacher ratios;
7. Families of students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities face a steep and costly learning curve and only those families with significant time and/or financial resources are able to navigate the complex system to fund:
- a. Private neuropsychological evaluations to secure a dyslexia diagnosis;
  - b. Private tutoring;
  - c. Tuition for private special education, in excess of \$60,000 annually<sup>11</sup>; and,
  - d. Annual retainers for special education lawyers to sue the DOE to recover the cost of tuition;
8. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that gives students with disabilities the right to receive a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) as outlined in a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP);
9. However, it remains difficult for parents to include the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia<sup>12</sup> in their child’s IEP in NYC public schools even though New York State amended Section 305 of the Education Law in 2017 and the Commissioner of Education issued guidance in 2018 to clarify that school districts may use these terms in “evaluations, eligibility determinations, or in developing an individualized education program (IEP)”<sup>13</sup>, because:
- a. The DOE conducts a psychoeducational evaluation not a neuropsychological evaluation<sup>14</sup> and dyslexia is a neurological disorder; and,

<sup>11</sup> City spending on private school tuition for learning disabled children has skyrocketed upwards from \$103.6 million in 2009-2010 to \$244.1 million in 2017-2018, <https://reason.com/video/voucher-special-needs-reimbursement-nyc/>.

<sup>12</sup> Dyscalculia is a learning disability in math and dysgraphia is learning disability that impacts writing skills such as handwriting, typing and spelling. See [understood.org](http://understood.org).

<sup>13</sup> See [paragraph 56 of Section 305 of NY State Education Law](#) and a summary of the New York State Education Department guidance related to students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia at <https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/new-york-state-education-department-98330/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/special-education/the-iep-process/evaluation>.

- b. Dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia are not a classifications in the DOE's IEP process and instead fall under the umbrella term "Learning Disability"<sup>15</sup>;
10. Private and charter schools that serve dyslexic students continue to expand and provide models for the DOE, such as The Windward School that opened a Manhattan campus in Fall 2015 for 100 students in grades 3-6 and now serves 350 students in grades 1-8<sup>16</sup> and Bridge Preparatory Charter School that opened in Staten Island in Fall 2019 and serves 90 students in grades 1-2 with plans to expand through grade 5<sup>17</sup>; and,
11. Currently the NYC DOE and School Construction Authority (SCA) do not fund or build new schools or classroom space based on learning type or system-wide criteria<sup>18</sup>.

**Therefore, be it resolved that Downtown Independent Democrats:**

1. Urges the NYC DOE to:
  - a. Implement universal dyslexia screening for all students;
  - b. Develop curriculum and programs to support and teach children with dyslexia *within* current schools and develop and maintain stand-alone schools and or programs as necessary to best serve dyslexic students within the public school system;
  - c. Fund and implement teacher training to recognize the early signs of dyslexia, screen students and effectively teach curriculum and programs for dyslexic students; and,
  - d. Conduct training and actively engage with school psychologists, special education teachers and related staff who implement the psychoeducational evaluations to ensure that they are aware of Section 305 of the Education Law regarding the use of dyslexia classifications in IEPs;

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/special-education/the-iep-process/the-iep>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.thewindwardschool.org/about>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://bridgeprepcharter.org/our-students/> and <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2019/09/04/a-reading-crisis-why-some-new-york-city-parents-created-a-school-for-dyslexic-students/>.

<sup>18</sup> The NYC DOE and SCA's Five-Year Capital Plan prioritizes new capacity based on overcrowding by school district. See the [DOE and SCA's Proposed FY 2020 - 2024 Five-Year Capital Plan](#), February 2019, page 8 for a list of priorities and page 19 for the funded projects by District and Sub-District. Within District 2, the only programmatic needs the DOE identifies are for Pre-Kindergarten seats, see the [DOE's 2019-2020 District 2 Planning Presentation](#), October 9, 2018, page 28.

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2. Urges the NYC DOE and SCA to explore the possibility of creating a DOE public school program for dyslexic students, based on the population size of identified students.

# DYSLEXIA FAQ

## Executive Summary

- The NYC Department of Education does not offer comprehensive early screening, curriculum, teacher training, programs and schools to support and teach children with dyslexia, creating a deeply inequitable system that is out of reach for the vast majority of New York City families.
- Families with time and financial resources to navigate a steep and costly learning curve, but most students fall through the cracks, making addressing the needs of dyslexic students a critical equity issue.
- Recommendations:
  1. Implement early screening, curriculum development and teacher training to support and teach dyslexic children.
  2. Create a DOE public school program for dyslexic students.

## Dyslexia Overview

- **Dyslexia is Common.** Dyslexia affects 5-20% of the population, according to the International Dyslexia Association. In NYC, approximately 20% of public-school students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and are classified as Students with Disabilities (SWD). In NYC, among students with disabilities, the most prevalent classifications are “learning disabilities” at 40% and “speech or language impairments” at 32%. Please note that parents and schools can initiate the process to assess a child and determine if that child qualifies for an IEP. *Data is not more precise because, 1) the DOE does not universally screen for dyslexia and 2) not all students who need help, undergo an evaluation to receive an IEP.*
- **Early Intervention and Learning to Reading by Grade 3 is Critical.** According to Esther Klein Friedman, Ph. D., the Executive Director for Literacy and Academic Intervention Services at the NYC DOE, “*students who are not reading at grade level by the end of grade 3 are likely to have very poor reading outcomes after. While academic recovery can still occur at any grade (or age), the chances are lowered if grade-level reading has not occurred at this point. But there are also indicators much earlier that predict success in grade three, particularly components of phonemic awareness.*”

*Accumulated Deficit.* Students who do not learn to read fall further and further behind when reading shifts from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn. Many struggling readers will be affected by the phenomenon of “accumulated deficit.” The further behind they are, the further behind they will get, unless targeted, effective intervention is put in place. For example, a student in the 20th percentile reads 0.7 minutes a day that adds up to 21,000 words per year. A student in the 80th percentile reads 14.2 minutes a day or 1,146,000 words per year.

- **Affordable Screening and District 2 Pilot.** The first step to address the problem is to identify struggling readers in grades K-2 and then to provide them the appropriate interventions. New York does not have universal dyslexia screening, but currently, 25

other states have some form of dyslexia screening. Screening tests are affordable, some only 99 cents per test, but must be coupled with teacher training to administer these tests.

*District 2 Pilots.* During the 2019-2020 school year, District 2 will implement several pilots: a) two screening pilots at 16 schools -- 11 schools, will use the [Feifer Assessment of Reading](#) (FAR) and five schools with a higher percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) will use [Ortiz Picture Vocabulary Acquisition Test](#) (Ortiz PVAT), b) a pilot ICT class at PS 234, capped at 20 students, eight of whom have a language-based learning disability and c) an intervention pilot at seven schools using [Data-Based Individualization](#).

- **Curriculum and Teacher Training Needed.** Currently, most public schools do not offer comprehensive reading and writing curricula or teacher training to address the needs of students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities. This includes structured literacy approaches, like Orton-Gillingham, that are systematic and cumulative, explicit and diagnostic with frequent assessments. Examples for reading include Preventing Academic Failure (PAF), Barton, Lindamood Bell, Recipe for Reading, Wilson Foundations, SPIRE and for writing, Judith Hochman's Teaching Basic Writing Skills. Guided reading and balanced literacy used by many NYC schools are not sufficient.
- **Private and Charter Options.** There are many private special education schools as well as a newly opened charter school on Staten Island for students with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities. The Windward School added a Manhattan campus in 2015 and already serves 350 students. Bridge Preparatory Charter School in Staten Island opened in Fall 2019 with 14-18 students per class, higher than a private special education school, but a substantially smaller class size than found in public schools.
- **Failure to Screen and Educate Dyslexic Students is a Critical Equity Issue.** Serving Students with Disabilities (SWD), including dyslexic students, is a critical education as well as equity issue because students whose parents lack the resources of time or funds fall through the cracks. Citywide, 20% of students are classified as SWD. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, only 18% and 19% of SWD pass state ELA and math tests, respectively. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade, SWD fall further behind — only 12% and 10% pass the same tests. The only demographic category that passes these tests at a lower rate are students currently classified as English Language Learners.

## Selected Case Studies

**Parent 1 Privately Funds Reading Support That Public School Cannot Provide:** In Kindergarten, her son's teachers raised concerns about her son's behavior, but as a clinical psychologist with the background and training to recognize the signs of possible learning disabilities, she thought there might be a reading-based learning disability. She also was acutely aware of the bias to classify black students, particularly boys, with behavioral problems when the underlying issue might be a learning one. After funding a private neuropsychological examination for \$7,000, she learned that her son was highly dyslexic. He needs small group reading instruction with a reading specialist trained in the Orton-Gillingham approach. Her child's school did not have any O-G trained reading specialists. Currently, the parents privately fund three hours of reading instruction per week, year-round, for their first-grade son.

**Parent 2 Secures Private Special Education for Two Children, \$200,000 per Year:** This parent has two children with language-based learning disabilities. Her daughter struggled in a

public-school setting for several years, secured an Individualized Education Plan, but did not receive the services that she needed. She eventually moved to a private special education school for 5<sup>th</sup> grade at an annual cost of approximately \$75,000 per year. Because of her experience with her daughter, her son received some interventions at an earlier age, but also did not receive the service that he needed in a public-school setting. He started 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at a private special education school that charges \$112,000 annually. In addition, she retains an attorney for \$5,000 annually per child to sue the DOE for reimbursement. Her daughter is beginning her second year and she has yet to be reimbursed for any tuition.

**Parent 3 Experienced Delays Diagnosing and Securing Educational Services for Her Daughter:** Parent 3 suspected that her daughter needed some help from a young age, but was dissuaded by the school because her grades were good in through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. In third grade, her child struggled with learning and anxiety and she funded a private neuropsychological examination that diagnosed her daughter as dyslexic. Her daughter received services for the last two months of school but due to field trips, teacher sick days and other scheduling changes, her daughter only received about one-fourth of the recommended services and it was difficult to track what services her daughter received. Meanwhile, she applied to private special education schools, which are extremely difficult to get into given the large demand. She was accepted to a private special education school for 4<sup>th</sup> grade and her family funded the tuition through loans and savings and annually sues the DOE for reimbursement.