

# **Speech for the San Diego School Board Meeting**

**Jan 28, 2014**

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Hello, my name is Tracy Block-Zaretsky and I am the other cofounder of the Dyslexia Training Institute. What do you think of when you hear the word dyslexia? Many people think of it as seeing letters or words backwards, or that it is just a general term or not really used anymore. Some think it isn't real or can be treated with vision therapy or color overlays. None of these are true! Dyslexia is very real and we have researchers at Yale, Georgetown, Florida Center for Reading Research, and many other prestigious research centers to thank for providing the peer-reviewed, evidence-based scientific research to verify that dyslexia is very real and is neurobiological in origin, meaning it is based in the way the brain is processing written language.

So, what is dyslexia? The dys part of dyslexia means lack of ability, the lexia part means with language. So, the simplest definition is lack of ability with language. However, it is much more complex than that definition. It is a deficit in the phonological processing of the language, meaning the sound system of our language. It is not a vision or a hearing problem. The brain of an individual with dyslexia is processing language, but it is taking alternative pathways in the brain making it much more difficult to learn to read and write. It is an unexpected difficulty because the individuals with dyslexia have average to above average IQs, yet they are struggling with learning to read and write like their peers. It is often called the hidden disability because you can't look at someone and tell they have dyslexia.

As my colleague stated, 20% of our population struggles with some degree of dyslexia. Many of us joke at times when we transpose letters in words or numbers that we must have dyslexia. But, dyslexia is no laughing matter for the kids who are struggling with dyslexia and their parents. Parents are not finding the answers they need when they are turning to the school system to help their struggling child. The truth is that our universities have greatly failed our teachers and other school staff in the area of dyslexia. Our universities have failed our general ed teachers, special ed teachers, reading specialists, school psychologists and administrators. They don't know what dyslexia is, how to potentially identify it or what to do to help provide appropriate remediation and accommodations for these struggling students.

Parents of these students have the right to believe the school system is going to provide the appropriate education for their child to be successful in school. Just like when a parent brings their child to a doctor and trust they know how to help their sick child, parents believe that the schools know how to help their struggling child because they are the education professionals. Unfortunately parents don't know that the school staff are ill prepared to help their child and that their child will most likely not get the type of remediation that is supported by evidenced-based research to help kids with dyslexia learn to read and write. And, make no doubt about it, these kids can learn to read and write with the appropriate remediation and supports.

In the famous words of Jonathan Mooney, author of *Learning Between the Lines* and *The Short Bus*, graduate of Brown University, and severely dyslexic, "I never suffered from dyslexia, but I always suffered from dysgraphia." He did succeed. Not because his school quickly identified him and provided him the appropriate supports, but because his mother did not accept the answers the school was giving them about why Jonathan was struggling. She fought long and she fought hard for him. But, why should she have had to fight at all? Why wasn't the school helping him? No, he did go to a SDUSD school, but the sad truth is that we talk to parents every day in the SDUSD school system that are trying to figure out why their child is struggling, that are so frustrated with trying to work with the school to help their child they don't know what to else to do, that are literally breaking down into tears because their bright child hates school and they are watching their child's self-esteem being taken away more and more every day they spend in school.

It is time for SDUSD to stand up and take charge of educating ALL our teachers, school psychologists and administrators in the area of dyslexia so that they can finally begin to answer the questions parents are asking and meeting the needs of this 20% of the students in your schools! You owe it to these kids, to these parents and to our community to prepare these kids for a successful education career and life beyond SDUSD.