

# Too Many Kids with Dyslexia Are Left Behind: Here's Why

Oct 11, 2017 by [Joanne Gouaux](#)

Finding our way through life's tangles and snares can be tricky. It's easier said than done. But with determination, skills, support and a sense of direction, it's possible.

In the hit Broadway play [Hamilton](#), playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda tells his story about rising above adversity in a song titled, "I Wrote My Way Out."

*"I wrote my way out  
When the world turned its back on me  
I was up against the wall  
I had no foundation  
No friends or family to catch my fall  
Running on empty  
With nothing left in me but doubt  
I picked up the pen  
And wrote my way out."*

How can a person write their way out, if they aren't able to read, write and spell fluently?

Identifying a problem is a necessary first step to finding a resolution. Knowing where to begin solving a problem can be more elusive. Writing our way out of adverse circumstances is one thing, but writing our way out of learning to read – that requires specialized instruction and support. Without proficient literacy, how do we expect kids to someday align with opportunities, and write their own future? To answer these driving questions, let's look at dyslexia in the context of our educational system.

October is dyslexia awareness month. Language-based learning disabilities affect age-appropriate reading, spelling, and sometimes writing, too. Effective, research-based practices have been identified and promoted for years. Everything necessary to provide learners with dyslexia with an appropriate education is available now, and has been for decades. Even so, too many kids are being left behind.

Dyslexia screening is a hot topic among advocates, especially in California where the CDE recently published new [California Dyslexia Guidelines](#). The desire for screening tools isn't new. Schools have had access to screening tools for years. Two examples: the [Shaywitz DyslexiaScreen](#) and [PAR Test](#).

With resources and tools available at our fingertips, one would think we'd be beyond grassroots "awareness" campaigns and the hunt for effective screening tools.

The truth is, we're not.

Awareness is needed as much today as it was thirty or more years ago. Awareness isn't enough. Public schools are aware. Educators are aware. We must act on implementing effective evidence-based programs. We must appreciate what's at stake, a child's present and future, the future of our workforce and country – it's time to take action!

## Spotting Dyslexia

Chances are, if you're reading this, you're already aware of dyslexia. It's common in all corners of the world. [Understood.org](https://www.understood.org) describes the signs of dyslexia as, "problems with accuracy and fluency in reading and spelling. But in some kids, dyslexia can impact writing, math and language, too."

Matching letters to sounds, and then using that skill to read words accurately and fluently is a skill known as decoding. Trouble decoding words is a key sign of dyslexia too. Despite the straightforward signs, general knowledge and public perception of dyslexia remains limited, often cloaked by myths and misconceptions among parents, educators and school leaders.

## 5 Truths About Dyslexia

### *1. Dyslexia is not a visual learning problem*

One of the most common misconceptions about dyslexia is that it is a visually-based learning problem that causes confusion about letters and words. Validated research tells us the majority of students with severe reading difficulty have substantial weakness in auditory-related skills, and identifying sounds within individual words. These learners also struggle to associate sounds with written letters.

### *2. Learners with dyslexia can become readers*

Another popular misconception about dyslexia is that most children with dyslexia will never learn to read well no matter what school and parents do to help. This is not true. Despite this popular misconception, research shows that struggling readers can become successful readers when provided with a specific type of instruction. Validated research has proven that the majority of struggling readers can learn to read when given intensive instruction using evidence-based programs. Research also has shown that with appropriate supports, children with early signs of learning problems may catch up to their peers by kindergarten.

### *3. Waiting doesn't help, it wastes precious time*

A common myth perpetuated at SST and IEP meetings is, “let’s wait and see.” Research has proven that delayed instruction creates an increased likelihood of failure. Critical literacy skills can be taught as early as preschool. Delayed intervention is unnecessary.

### *4. Learners with dyslexia don't have a “look”*

Among some generations, there’s a misconception that dyslexic kids must have identifying physical features, or a “look.” This is untrue. In fact, as is the case for many individuals with chronic health conditions and developmental differences – there is no “look.”

### *5. People with dyslexia are smart and capable of learning*

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One of the biggest roadblocks I’ve experienced in getting my kids access to appropriate instruction comes from well-intentioned educators who affectionately dote... “Awe, but \_\_\_\_\_ is so smart. \_\_\_\_\_ will be fine.” Yes, smart — and capable of learning. Struggling readers and writers deserve to be taught the way they learn so they can become independent learners and well-adjusted people with the ability to secure good paying, stable employment.

**Overlooking dyslexia creates systemic effects. We need the courage to look at the facts:**

### *High School Drop Out Rates*

In 2012, NPR published a story with a picture of Arne Duncan, former Secretary of Education at the National Mall, in front of the Washington Monument, posing next to 857 empty desks – representing the number of high school drop-outs that occur every hour in the U.S. He recognized the crisis in public education.

### *The Majority of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System have Educational Disabilities*

Leading advocate trainers Pam and Pete Wright, author's of *From Emotions to Advocacy*, write extensively about advocacy strategies, skills and the consequences of not supporting children and youth with learning disabilities. Their website, Wrightslaw, shares [striking statistics](#).

- ) *Seventy percent of children in the juvenile justice system have educational disabilities -- the vast majority have an Emotional Disturbance (ED) and/or Specific Learning Disabilities.*
- ) *Have the lowest graduation rates of all children with disabilities, nationally, only 35% graduate from high school (compared to 76% for all students).*
- ) *Of those who drop out of school, 73 percent are arrested within five years.*

California is the most populous state in the U.S., representing 38 million people. Nearly twenty years ago, in 1999, the California Special Education Reading Task Force in Sacramento published a comprehensive report of critical ideas focusing on meaningful reform from the California Reading Initiative and Special Education. The goal of the report was to address the importance of improving the reading achievement and literacy levels of students. The report includes discussion about effective reading instruction, early reading instruction, early reading intervention and prevention, assessment, access to core curriculum, and practices linked to research.

#### **Excerpt:**

*“Teaching children to read is a fundamental responsibility of all educators. Research has shown that for many children, learning to read is a struggle. Although the numbers are debated, it is well-established that 30 to 40 percent of children will have significant difficulty learning to read. In today’s society, the failure to read proficiently has profound educational and life consequences – it is the most likely reason that children drop out of school, are retained, or are referred to special education. Poor reading skills also greatly limit postsecondary school and work options. The importance of teaching children to read cannot be understated.”*

## ***We’ve Known About the Problem for Far Too Long***

Too many students are deprived of the chance to realize their full potential and become successful self-determined adults. Schools are responsible for the costs of education services, and many struggle with funding. We must also keep in mind that the costs become even higher for kids who exit school and into society, becoming adults with inadequate skills and academic proficiencies. As adults their needs are significant, contributing to state and federal spending on public assistance, social service, and incarceration.

We have four decades of scientific research from NIH, access to proven evidence-based reading and writing programs, federal and state laws, and Supreme Court precedents. Many schools throughout the U.S. have put research, curriculum and modalities in place, yet the availability of evidence-based language programs in schools

remains a vital contemporary need. Many public schools lag behind at both adopting and implementing such programs. This failure to act has a significant disadvantage, and contributes to the astounding high school drop rate in the U.S.

## *Dyslexia Advocacy*

*“Fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”*  
&ndas; Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Our day-to-day lives are filled with demands on our attention. It’s easy to lose sight of our place in the world. Over the years, groups have formed to raise awareness with the goal of improving dyslexia services in local schools. The National Center for Learning Disabilities, Understood.org and Decoding Dyslexia are leaders in empowering parents, transforming schools and advocating for equal rights and opportunities for the one in five children and adults with learning and attention issues. The long-term aim is not perfection. The goal is providing an on-ramp to becoming a healthy independent learner and well-adjusted, functional person.

## *Stronger Together*

I had an opportunity to join fellow parent advocates for Dyslexia Hill Days in Washington D.C. in June. Parents from all over the country came together to share stories, ideas and insights. Our common struggles and triumphs helped us forge new friendships. We met with policymakers to describe the obstacles families of learners with dyslexia face accessing appropriate instruction.

Sharing our stories helps everyone better understand human challenges. As advocates and parents, our participation in these types of group events creates an opportunity for our kids to develop leadership skills through civic engagement. It also offers a sense of belonging.

When we advocate together for a common cause, we’re showing kids another way to “write their way out” of future challenges.

It’s fascinating to watch advocates share their messages. Sharing personal experiences on behalf of a cause can bring out creativity. For example, some advocates leveraged videos, humor, or testimonials that their children wrote. Others used buttons, t-shirts, bags, jewelry or pictures.

Raising public awareness about dyslexia and language-based learning differences is one step toward building a better future. We have choices. We can reject apathy, and the status quo that overlooks the connection between literacy, poverty and the juvenile justice system. Together, we can be part of the solution.

## **Moving Forward**

As parents, educators and advocates, we share a common passion for children, and a history of being dynamic problem solvers. Over the past one hundred years, our country, along with many others throughout the world, rose to the challenges of the Great Depression. Our families endured two world wars, and a series of crises. Some that are eerily familiar to today. Hot issues took our world to the brink of nuclear armageddon, and then back to times of peace and prosperity. Our strength is both physical and emotional. When the world gives us challenges, we roll up our selves and dig in.

We can commit to a common goal for all children to receive the education and the supports they need to maximize their development and potential so that they can participate meaningfully in their future roles in our democracy and workforce. To accomplish this goal, school leaders, educators, and parents can insist that scientifically-validated programs be incorporated in the classroom and instructional materials.

On a more personal level, what does it mean for a struggling learner to write their way out? For me, in the context of dyslexia, it means developing the capacity to be an independent learner, a fully-formed person, with the ability to brainstorm solutions and leverage strategies for problem-solving. It means emerging from school with confidence in one's abilities, and the freedom to make choices about one's future.

As adults, we write our way out by facing setbacks, roadblocks and struggles head-on. We embrace adversity's invitation to rise-up, take matters into our hands, and find a path forward even if it means changing paths or directions. As parents, sometimes this happens through a culture of collaboration and coordination across educational and learning center service agencies, and other times it means striking out on our own.

It's important for parents to know that help and solutions are available. Be willing to ask questions, look for options, and keep moving forward until we find solutions to reach our goal. By investing in our kid's lives, we're shaping future leaders of our local communities, our country, and the world.

## References & Further Reading

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