



Decoding Dyslexia Ontario

Advocate. Educate. Empower.

Committee of the Whole, Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB)
December 8, 2020

Dear Members of the Committee:

Grassroots parents group Decoding Dyslexia Ontario would like to acknowledge the effort and personal sacrifices that educators and administrators are making to provide a safe learning environment for our children during this very difficult time. We know that when evidence-based reading instruction, support and accommodations are provided most students with dyslexia can learn alongside their peers and achieve their full potential. However, as we head into the second quadmester of this school year, we are seeing more and more evidence that the most vulnerable learners are being left behind. The pandemic has further exacerbated existing educational barriers for many vulnerable students in our community, and this is the reality for many students with dyslexia here in Ottawa, and across the province.

As families in the OCDSB community, we hope to shine a light on the challenges that students with dyslexia are currently facing in the pandemic education environment, and in doing so, help bring about greater awareness about what these students need to learn and feel emotionally safe in their learning environment.

Critical learning supports missing during the pandemic

A [new survey by Abacus Data](#) showed that: “Two-thirds of youth [in Canada] who are in school say the pandemic situation has made it more difficult for them to learn. And 67% are struggling to access the supports they need to learn as a result. Half have started rethinking their plans for education.”

Without support, students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities – who represent the largest category of exceptionalities in Ontario public schools – face many barriers in the learning environment; the challenges of the pandemic have made things worse.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission, in a July 2020 letter to MOE said that, “The OHRC has heard from stakeholders that students with special education needs and other vulnerabilities have experienced unique and compounded challenges, that their circumstances have not consistently been considered and addressed, and that as a result, they have fallen even further behind than their peers” (OHRC, Letter to MOE, http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-minister-education-school-leaders-respecting-rights-students-disabilities).

In October, Lawrence Barns, President & Chief Executive Officer of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario stated that,

“In the middle of this Pandemic it is clear that those who already faced barriers to success now have additional challenges to overcome. This Pandemic has heightened challenges at school, university, the workplace and of course homes in lockdown. Our desire is to remind people that stigma has very real negative consequences and that support has the reverse impact. Statistics in Canada weren’t great and likely worse during this time, it’s time for all of us to do better at supporting those with Learning Disabilities” (<https://www.ldao.ca/ld-awareness-month-october/>).

[New research](#) from the University of Alberta professor George Georgiou shows what this looks like for students with dyslexia. A comparison of reading ability scores among Albertan students in grades 1 to 3 before and after COVID-19 classroom shutdowns showed that those who already had reading problems were up to six months behind where they should have been.

“Because the schools were closed and many students went online, those already struggling with their reading skills didn’t get the pull-out, small group intervention when they needed it, beyond regular classroom instruction, and their reading skills got worse over time,” said Georgiou. “I’m worried the number of poor readers will increase over time and if this continues, it means that schools will have to invest significant dollars in supporting these children for the rest of their school lives.”

Here in Ottawa, a recent OCDSB back-to-school [survey](#) showed that a significant number of students with dyslexia and other exceptionalities are struggling to get support—both online and in class.

We are seeing similar reports from across Canada, in the US, and globally.

Key concerns

During the pandemic, we have heard regularly from parents that adapting to pandemic life, the condensed quadmester system, difficulty in obtaining educational assessments, effective reading intervention, instructional support and accommodations, challenges related to virtual learning, has placed a heavy burden on their dyslexic children. Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is increasingly concerned that if these services are not delivered, these students will face undue pressure and gaps in their education that will affect their long-term learning and well-being.

The OCDSB back-to-school survey illustrates our concerns. The [survey](#) showed that most parents and students appreciate the return to school and that students are engaged in learning. However, 30% of virtual learners reported that their well-being has worsened since returning to school, and 19% said that teachers are sometimes or rarely available for support when they need it. 35% of in-class learners said their well-being has worsened since returning to school, and 24% said they were very uncomfortable or uncomfortable using materials and resources from the online learning platform.

Students who identify as having IEPs, learning disabilities, dyslexia and other learning and attention issues reported feeling “stupid” and dumb,” and parents describe their learning experience as “soul crushing”, with their learning needs being “tragically ignored.”

In the OCDSB back to school survey (Oct. 2020) parents and students reported:

- No access to IEP or a delayed IEP
- IEPs that are in place are not being followed
- No access to, or not enough, learning support teachers and none/not enough one-on-one support
- Quadmester system posing barriers to learning; accelerated learning without accommodations and supports makes it hard for dyslexic/LD kids to keep up
- Inaccessible technologies and document formats, such as PDFs
- Lack of direct instructional support, inaccessible curriculum, and heavy workload causing emotional distress and a further stigmatization for students (“soul-crushing”, “feels worthless ad stupid”, “looking like the dumb kid”)
- Lack of communication between school and families, and lack of support, places heavy onus on parents to assist children with homework, etc.

We identified more than 70 comments by concerned parents and students in the OCDSB survey, here are just a few:

“I haven't received the extra time afforded by my IEP due to the classroom conditions during covid, which has impacted my marks going in to university. Students with extra time have it on their IEP for a reason, they need it to show their understanding,” I am a secondary [in class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

“resources for extra help feel unapproachable or out of reach; as a student with an IEP this makes it harder to keep up with my classmates,” I am a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

“I have had a horrible experience, I am finding it difficult to learn and I cannot get the help when I need it. I have an IEP that is not being used. **I need to be able to communicate with my teacher without letting all 30 people in the class know my questions,”** I am an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) Secondary School student (grades 9 to 12)

“No LST. My son has an IEP and needs more help than is possible in the virtual class, therefore I have become his LST, which is unsustainable as I work FT,” parent of an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) elementary school student (JK to grade 8)

“Kids with disabilities and learning disabilities are being tragically ignored by the virtual school. These kids already struggle enough,” parent of an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) elementary school student (JK to grade 8)

“The accelerated learning with the virtual structure is extremely challenging for students with an IEP. They move to another module before the student can get help and fully understands the current module,” an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) secondary school student (grades 9 to 12)

“My daughter has an IEP but is not getting much support in her two classes. Her teachers mean very well but are not able to accommodate her. She feels "stupid" and frustrated, sometimes even afraid to go to class for fear of looking like the dumb kid,” I am the parent/guardian of [in-class] secondary school student (grades 9 to 12)

“super condensed classes don't work for IEP kids; two of my kids have IEPs for dyslexia. One days worth [of] homework takes hours for them. condensing one subject 8 hours/day for 5 days is too much,” I am the parent/guardian of a secondary school [in-class] student (grades 9 to 12)

“The pace of a high school quadmestered course is so fast. Particularly for a course like math, this is challenging. **For a child with an IEP for extra time/slow processing this is soul crushing,**” I am the parent/guardian of a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

“Children with IEP and students in need of extra support have limited access to this under the current model used at my child's school. **It is these populations that are going to suffer the most during this period, but are not getting much attention and action to help them,**” I am the parent/guardian of a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

“**My child has an IEP. She has expressed that she often does not understand instructions but that it takes a long time for the teacher to get to her.** Not the teacher's fault. It is just that the teacher is stretched helping many other kids 1 on 1. Worried without small groups, extra support suffers,” I am the parent/guardian of an elementary [in-class] school student (JK to grade 8)

“**IEPs have, in practise, been discontinued...**arguably more important in such a high stress environment,” I am a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

Some parents reported that their children are receiving support, saying that this is making all the difference to their learning and mental health:

“My daughter has had her learning needs met by the small class sizes. **Her teachers are aware of her IEP and her learning style - she is not "lost in the crowd" anymore.** I am the parent/guardian of a secondary school student” (grades 9 to 12)

Ensure accessibility in pandemic learning

Pre-pandemic, [students with dyslexia showed very sizable education achievement gaps](#) and outcomes, and negative social-emotional impacts, in comparison with neurotypical students, including:

- long-term literacy challenges
- dropping out of school
- higher risk of suspension

- mental health challenges
- bullying and abuse
- unemployment and underemployment
- homelessness and incarceration

As research shows, these challenges are further compounded for students with multiple exceptionalities, as well as low income and racialized students. Last winter, thousands of parents provided lived experience of these challenges to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) Right to Read Inquiry.

Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is concerned that the inequity we see in our education system is growing even greater during the pandemic, and further widening the gap for students who can't pay for private tutoring, devices and software, and high-speed internet.

The same concerns have been raised by many others in the province.

The [Planning for Emergencies Working Group released a report](#) in July citing the Covid-19 barriers facing students with disabilities in Ontario. They reported emerging "gaps in student skills and knowledge," identified ongoing accessibility issues with virtual learning, and made recommendations to the Ministry of Education and school boards.

The [OHRC wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education](#) reminding it of its obligation to students with exceptionalities during the pandemic -- including access to the Empower Reading program (which we understand has not yet been made available to all students):

"Under the *Code*, students with disabilities have a right to meaningful access to the education that all other students receive. Education providers have a legal duty to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities who are adversely affected by a requirement, rule or standard. Accommodation is necessary to address barriers in education that would otherwise prevent students with disabilities from having equal opportunities, access and benefits."

The [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance](#) has stated that:

"Before COVID, Ontario's education system had far too many disability barriers, impeding many students with disabilities. The move to online learning created even more hardships for them, and their teachers."

We understand the challenges of providing education services during the pandemic, and we are grateful that our Board has provided a dedicated virtual learning school to all who need it.

Safety is paramount. In that context, we have written the Ministry of Education asking that they ensure that, where possible, students with dyslexia (*and all students*) receive the support and accommodations that they need to learn and be emotionally well during the pandemic. For example, we know that reading instruction can be provided online, and suggest that this could be a way to continue supporting students in the coming months.

Recommendations to the Ministry of Education:

1. Ensuring that students' rights to timely identification and remediation of reading disabilities are met
2. Ensuring that students have access to timely and effective learning support and one-on-one support with classroom teachers (virtual and in-class)
3. Providing support to teachers to deliver dyslexia-friendly instruction and accommodations, for example, use data from school boards to develop tailored supports, tip-sheets and frequently asked questions for staff
4. Providing greater support to parents to navigate the IEP process and the virtual learning environment
5. Further exploring the data, key themes, and trends overall and within disaggregated groups identified with exceptionalities (e.g. English language learners, lower socio-economic and racialized students)
6. Working with the dyslexia community, and engaging with students directly, to identify what is working, and what is not

The pandemic has highlighted the existing inequities in the Ontario education system for students with dyslexia and other exceptionalities. Within the OCDSB community, how can we collaborate with the Board and educators to address students' concerns as we all navigate this very difficult time together—and minimize the impact going forward? We hope that we can work together to ensure that all children have equitable access to the opportunities that our public schools are meant to provide.

Sincerely,
Decoding Dyslexia Ontario

Background

About dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difference that makes it difficult — but not impossible — to read, write and spell. Dyslexia is the most common learning exceptionalality in Ontario schools, affecting at least 2 children in every classroom. Children with dyslexia can learn to read, write and spell with effective instruction. Yet, currently in Ontario schools, children with dyslexia do not have access to the support they need, and show very sizable education achievement gaps and outcomes in comparison with neurotypical students.

Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is driven by families – parents, students and educators -- who are concerned with the limited access to interventions for children with dyslexia in our schools. We raise dyslexia awareness and empower families to support their children. We advocate for best practices regarding identification, remediation and support for students with dyslexia in Ontario schools. We are a voluntary organization with active members across Ontario, including Ottawa.

Contact us:

Email: decodingdyslexiaon@gmail.com

Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/DecodingDyslexiaOntario/>

Website: TBA

Key statistics/facts (from the Ontario Human Rights Commission)

- Reading disabilities affect approximately 10% of the population
- Dyslexia is the most common reading disability; it involves difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, and poor spelling and decoding abilities
- Approximately 80% of people with learning disabilities have dyslexia
- In 2013 – 14, school boards reported that 41.4% (75,543) of exceptional students identified by an Identification, Placement, Review Committee (IPRC) had a learning disability
 - This is the largest exceptionalality group of the 12 exceptionalities specifically recognized by the Ministry of Education (MOE)
 - The MOE states that it is a reasonable hypothesis that a significant portion of students receiving special education programs and services, but not identified by an IPRC, have learning disabilities (144,987 or 7.1% of total enrollment)
- 2018 – 2019 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) results indicate that 26% of Ontario's Grade 3 students and 53% of Grade 3 students with special education needs did not meet the Provincial Standard (Level 3 or 4) for reading

- Only 50% of students with special education needs passed the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, which measures whether students are meeting the minimum standard for literacy across all subjects up to the end of Grade 9.
 - Successfully completing the literacy test is one of the requirements to earn an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. EQAO states that “the persistent discrepancy in achievement between students with special education needs and those without requires attention”
- Without appropriate instruction, more than 74% of children entering Grade 1 who are at risk for reading failure will continue to have reading problems into adulthood
- An estimated 40% of people with learning disabilities struggle with anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem
- In one study, 52% of homeless youth in Toronto had a reading disability
- 65% of people in Canadian correctional facilities have lower than elementary-level literacy skills
- Canadians with a learning disability were 46% more likely to have attempted suicide

(Source: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-read-inquiry-reading-disabilities-backgrounder>)

About the OCDSB survey

The OCDSB back-to-school survey asked virtual and in-person learners and their parents: “What are the most important things you want to share about your/your families school experience so far this year?”

Link to survey results: <https://ocdsb.ca/cms/One.aspx?portalId=55478&pageId=33336962>

References

Abacus Data, Covid-19 & Canadian Youth: Impacts, Perspectives and the Recovery (November 2020)

(<https://www.abacusdata.ca/covid19-and-canadian-youth/>)

AODA alliance statement: Ontario’s Ministry of Education Must Now Meet the Urgent Needs of A Third of a Million Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis (May 4, 2020)

(<https://aoda.ca/ontarios-ministry-of-education-must-now-meet-the-urgent-needs-of-a-third-of-a-million-students-with-disabilities-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>)

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, Learning Disabilities Awareness month (October 2020) (<https://www.ldao.ca/ld-awareness-month-october/>)

OHRC statement: Letter to the Minister of Education, school leaders on respecting the rights of students with disabilities (July 14, 2020)

(http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-minister-education-school-leaders-respecting-rights-students-disabilities)

OCDSB 2019-2020 Suspension Data: “In 2019-2020, approximately **19% of the OCDSB student population was identified with special education needs** (excluding gifted) (14,498 of 74,854), **yet accounted for 49% (825) of students who were suspended.** The suspension rate for students with special education needs was 2.5 times higher than expected given their representation in the overall student population, and were 4 times as likely to receive a suspension compared to all other students.”

([OCDSB 2019-2020 Suspension Data - Ottawa-Carleton District School Board](#))

Pandemic putting young readers behind the learning curve, says education expert: Younger online learners need extra support from teachers and parents, especially if they already struggled with reading before COVID-19, suggests U of A professor (November 19, 2020)

(<https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2020/11/pandemic-putting-young-readers-behind-the-learning-curve-says-education-expert.html>)

The Planning for Emergencies Working Group report: Covid-19 barriers facing students with disabilities in Ontario and recommendations (July 14, 2020)

(<https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-barriers-students-disabilities-and-recommendations>)

Racialized, disabled, gender diverse students more likely to be suspended from Ottawa schools, report suggests (Jacquie Miller, The Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 25, 2020)

(<https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/racialized-disabled-gender-diverse-students-more-likely-to-be-suspended-from-ottawa-schools-report-suggests>)

School shutdowns have put children up to eight months behind in reading, research indicates (Caroline Alphonso, The Globe and Mail, Nov. 26, 2020)

(<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/amp/canada/article-school-shutdowns-have-put-children-up-to-eight-months-behind-in/>)

US Government Accountability Office report: ELL and SEN student pandemic virtual learning experiences -- barriers and the opportunities (<https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/710779.pdf>)