

## Barriers to Excellence

By Eric McGehearty

I would like to start by thanking you for inviting me to speak today. In order to improve Dyslexia and LD policy, it's critical that people with dyslexia are involved in the conversation.

You have asked me to speak about barriers, so I would like to start by addressing barriers, including the words that create them. To begin with, I'd like to change the vocabulary of this conversation. This committee's title, "The Interim Committee on Dyslexia and Related Disorders", is a barrier to its success. Dyslexia is not and should not be referred to as a disorder. It is not something you have fixed by a doctor's office. If I used a wheelchair would you say I had a disorder? Dyslexia is not a disease, it is a disability. A disability may require some accommodation; a disorder indicates a disturbance of normal functions that must be fixed. When we talk about removing barriers, let us first start with the language that we use.

I would also like to point out a common and insidious misperception: the association between dyslexics and laziness. I would like to use myself as an example. I graduated from college with honors and then completed graduate school. I now own my own company and have over a dozen people working for me. I've never read a book and still don't read. Am I lazy? Dyslexia is a disability that makes me learn differently. I do not comprehend information well when it is in written format. This has nothing to do with my or any other dyslexic's ability to learn. It is a matter of format and presentation. I think if we can separate in our minds the difference between learning and reading we have accomplished much.

I am here today to encourage you to build “ramps”; pathways to success built with accessible formats. When a man in a wheelchair approaches a building, do we ask him to climb the stairs? No! We build a ramp. Dyslexia and learning disabilities should be treated the same way. We are not here today to figure out how to make all dyslexics great readers. We are here today to give dyslexics access to the appropriate accommodations, the “ramps”, or tools they need to be successful. Don’t misunderstand me; I am not suggesting we stop teaching kids how to read, I am suggesting we change our focus from reading to success.

When someone suffers a severe spinal cord injury, the first year is usually spent in intensive physical therapy. After that the focus turns from walking to successful independent living. Changes are made to the house to accommodate a wheelchair. In the same manner, early childhood detection of learning disabilities and assessment of reading skills is important. The use of teaching techniques like Orton Gillingham and other multi-sensory teaching techniques can be very beneficial in helping young children keep up with classmates. At the same time, however, children should be introduced to accommodations and technologies that can help them participate in the classroom and learn with their peers. One of the most insidious side effects of our current educational methodology is that we focus on a child’s struggle with reading and spelling, to the point that the rest of his or her education is sacrificed. This focus results in a child who is neither a good reader or properly prepared for academics or adult life. Certainly by the 4th or 5th grade, our focus should transition from teaching kids to read, to showing them how to lead a successful independent life. Our goal should be to help students achieving lifelong success by teaching them how to learn independently, apply critical thinking, and pursue their own potential for excellence.

I find it interesting that we spend a great deal of time and consideration on kids with dyslexia, but so often forget adults. Dyslexia does not go away during adolescence. Adults with learning disabilities constitute 25-40% of all welfare recipients. A significant percentage of our prison inmates have been diagnosed with a learning disability. 43% of dyslexics drop out of highschool, in comparison with only 33% of people who are blind. I bring up these figures to demonstrate that properly addressing learning disorders isn't only a social issue, but also an economic issue. If we can put more people on a successful path by giving them access to the tools necessary to achieve life success, we can make a substantial economic impact on the state.

A 20-year study conducted by Director of Research at Schwab Learning tracked outcomes for adults with dyslexia. Participants ranged from a wealthy CEO to a death-row inmate. The study concluded that:

*"the attributes of self-awareness, perseverance, proactivity, emotional stability, goal setting, and the use of support systems were more powerful predictors of success than numerous other variables, including IQ, academic achievement, life stressors, age, gender, SES [socioeconomic status], and ethnicity, and many other variables."*

I think it could be said that by focusing on excellence, rather than disability, we could substantially improve our results. In other words, by giving people the tools they need, and encouraging our young people to find and grow their talents, we can equip them for success.

As an adult with dyslexia, I would like to talk about the tools I use on a daily basis. One of the primary tools I use is text-to-speech technology. Today, with the use of a computer, I can listen to digitally formatted text, which I find a very efficient way of gathering information. In fact, with the software I use, I can control the speed of the text. A typical person might speak at 180wpm. I can choose to listen to the text faster or slower based on my personalized preference. I like to listen to the text at 300-400wpm, which allows me to gather information much quicker and at a similar pace to a normal reading speed. I mentioned earlier in this speech that I have never read a book. I may not have read them, but I have listened to hundreds if not thousands of books. Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic, the Library of Congress, and other organizations provide audio books to the learning disabled, blind, and low vision communities. The services provided by these organizations were an important part of my childhood and academic life. They have been integral to my success, and remain important to me as an adult.

Today, technology is moving at a rapid pace. Intel recently launched the Intel Health Reader, a handheld device that can take a picture and immediately convert it into audio format. Soon my cell phone will probably be able to do the same thing. Even today, my iPhone can read emails out loud and use voice recognition software to spell for me.

We live in the best possible time to make the world universally accessible. Are we willing to bring that accessibility to the lives of young people and adults with a learning disability? Our success will be determined by our willingness to change perceptions, as well as the vocabulary of the discussion. Some of our cultures' best and brightest throughout history have had learning disabilities and extraordinary talents: Henry Ford, Charles

Schwab, William Hewitt, Walt Disney and Thomas Edison, to name a few. I encourage you to set up academic environments that develop talent, and to accept the diverse learning styles of the dyslexic and LD community.