

## Barriers to Excellence

By Eric McGehearty

I would like to start by thanking you for inviting me to speak to day. One of the things I think is most critical about improving Dyslexia and LD policy is involving dyslexics in the conversation. You have asked me to speak about barriers, so I would like to start by addressing barriers. And I'd like to start by changing the vocabulary of conversation and the words that we use that create barriers in life. The title for this very 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 go to the doctor and have fixed. If I were sitting here in a well char would you say I had a disorder? Dyslexia is not a disease, it is a disability, is a person who has low vision considered as having a disorder? A disability may require some accommodation; a disorder indicates a disturbance of normal functions that must be fixed. So, when you ask me about barriers let us first start with the language that we use, with that in mind I would like to point out several very important distinctions. One of the most common and insidious is 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 take information in well, in the 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 the mind the difference between learning and reading we have accomplished much.

I am here today to encourage you to build ramps; pathways to success are about building accessible formats to learn. When a man in a wheelchair approaches a building, do you ask him to climb the stairs, NO! We build a ramp. Today is about building ramps, 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, the 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 injury, usually the first year is 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 tone early childhood detection and reading skills training is important. The use of teaching techniques like Orton Gillingham and other multi-sensory teaching techniques to help young children keep up with classmates at an early age can be very beneficial. However, at the same time 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 to focus on a child's struggle with reading and spelling to where the rest of their education is sacrificed. Consequently, this 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 focus should be turned from teaching kids to read to showing them how to lead a successful independent life.

Our goal should be achieving lifelong success teaching the students how to learn independently, apply critical thinking and pursue their own potential for excellence. I think what is interesting is the amount of time we

spend on kids with dyslexia, but what we so often forgotten is adults with dyslexia. 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 are going to drop out of college in comparison to only 33% of people who are blind will drop out of college. 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 concludes:

*"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. What I mean by that is giving people the tools to success and encouraging our young people to find and grow their talents we will equip them with the tools for successful results.

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 a computer I can listen to digitally formatted text which is a very efficient way of gathering information. In fact with the software I use, I can control the speed of the text. A normal person might speak at 180wpm and 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 the speech, that I have never read a book, I may not have read them but I have listened to 100's if not 1000's of books. Services like Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic and the Library of Congress provide audio books to the learning disabled, blind and low vision community, and their services have been integral to my success. They were an important part of my childhood and academic life, as well as my adult life. Today technology is moving at a rapid pace, recently Intel launched a new product called the Intel Health Reader which is 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. Today, when in a pinch, my iPhone can spell for me through voice recognition and read emails out loud.

We live in the best possible time to make the world universally accessible, the question is do we have the willingness 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 change the vocabulary of the discussion. Some of our cultures best and brightest throughout history have had learning disabilities, and they also had 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 extraordinary talents and accept the diverse learning styles that come with a dyslexic and LD community.