

Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Hearing
“Educational Milestones of Dyslexia”
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Baton Rouge, LA

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Being Dyslexia and 504 Coordinator for a school district in Louisiana encompasses many responsibilities. A coordinator must be educated about dyslexia and be knowledgeable about the Section 504 Law. A coordinator must insure that the provisions of *Bulletin 1903, Regulations and Guidelines for Implementation of the Louisiana Law for the Education of Dyslexic Students* be properly implemented. Finally, a coordinator must remember that the needs of the student come first.

LEAs must follow *Bulletin 1903*. This publication provides for “implementation of R.S. 17:7(11), Louisiana's Law for identification and services within the regular education program for students demonstrating characteristics of dyslexia.”

While this Louisiana Law states that LEAs must only identify for characteristics of dyslexia, there is also a statement in the law that “any private evaluation presented by the parent must be considered by the school system's pupil appraisal staff for review and interpretation.”

Once a student has been identified by an initial Section 504 evaluation with characteristics of dyslexia (*Bulletin 1903*) and/or the LEA has received a diagnosis of dyslexia by way of a private evaluation, a student may be eligible to receive services and accommodations for characteristics of dyslexia or dyslexia. An Individual Accommodation Plan (IAP) is written and accommodations are selected by the consensus of the School Building Level Committee (SBLC). Accommodations are selected that will remove barriers caused by poor reading and writing and allow the student to access education in the same way as non-disabled peers. Also, the student is enrolled in a Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) Program.

The SBLC is assigned the task of selecting accommodations for the student's IAP. Accommodations must be data driven with the intent of leveling the playing field for the dyslexic student. Section 504 accommodations are intended to support the student but not create an advantage.

While the selection and implementation of appropriate accommodations seems straight forward, it can be a challenging process. Consideration must be given in selecting accommodations in four categories; setting, presentation and response, time demands and behavior. Accommodations are also selected for Standardized Tests.

One frequent accommodation for the student with characteristics of dyslexia is extended time. Deciding a fair amount of time for each student poses a challenge. I am frequently asked what constitutes a fair amount of time. While this seems a straightforward question, it is sometimes complex. For example, the parent of a student called the state 504 Coordinator and voiced concerns regarding the amount of extended time her child received for testing. The state 504

Coordinator suggested that defining a set amount of time for extended time may possibly be a point that is arbitrational. A better approach was suggested. This approach involves monitoring the time it takes a student to take a test and then calculating the average of extended time used. In this way, the accommodation is specific to the needs of that particular student.

Another accommodation needed to support most students with characteristics of dyslexia is tests read aloud. It is very frustrating for a student who has phonological deficits to read and demonstrate what is learned when they are struggling to read text. It causes anxiety and impedes success. With accommodations success is viable.

To illustrate this, I share the story of a middle school male student identified with characteristics of dyslexia. The student began receiving services through an MSL Program and an IAP was written with accommodations of extended time and tests read aloud. These accommodations supported the student so that content learned could be assessed fairly.

This student completed the MSL Program in his first year of high school. He is a talented athlete. It is important that the student maintain a strong grade point average so that he can pursue his goal of playing his chosen sport at the collegiate level and possibly beyond. A college interested in recruiting him has already contacted me inquiring about the kinds of accommodations he may need for support in college.

A second example follows. When I was an Academic Language Therapist in a private school, the teacher of a high school student who was a struggling reader approached me. When I first met this young man, he sat with his head down and did not make eye contact with me. I asked him what I could do for him and he said he wanted to be able to read like everyone else.

The student began receiving instruction through an MLS Program. He began receiving accommodations of extended time and tests read aloud. His grades improved with these two accommodations. He was able to access education when his struggle to read was removed. Most importantly his self- confidence increased. So much that he volunteered to read aloud in one of his classes. Not an easy feat for a student with characteristics of dyslexia but a milestone for this student! When our paths crossed on campus, I was delighted to see that his head was held high and a smile was on his face.

As a district coordinator, parents ask me if students will be able to receive 504 accommodations in college. I explain that there are no formal Section 504 Plans in college but colleges will issue accommodations. The students must advocate for themselves and contact the disabilities department at the college and inquire about the process of receiving accommodations. Normally, a college will require a student to provide documentation of their disability and provide documentation that accommodations were used in high school. However, colleges make their own determination on what the student needs to perform academically.

The IAP and selection of accommodations evolves and changes over time. Early on, the parent is the sole advocate for their child and may play a major role in selection of accommodations. But as the child progresses through school, they learn to become their own advocate in selecting accommodations.

The following is an illustration of a parent who became an advocate for their child. The parent of a middle school student reported that her son was not receiving extended time on a test that measured his reading level. So, the parent advocated for son's extended time. He was allotted the accommodation, and his measured reading level increased from fourth to eleventh grade. Part of my responsibilities as Dyslexia and 504 Coordinator is teacher training. At the beginning of the year, I provide school counselors with an overview of Section 504. A significant part of training is instruction on how to select appropriate accommodations and how the accommodations can be implemented in the classroom to support the student.

Administrators, counselors and teachers often inquire about ways to provide the accommodations of tests read aloud, extended time and small group if a number of students in a class require these accommodations. First, I encourage them to use text to speech programs for tests read aloud. For small group, I encourage teachers to organize the classroom at the first of the year to include a small group testing area. Occasionally, teachers asked if students can leave the room to receive accommodations. A reminder is given that Section 504 Law mandates that accommodations be given in the least restrictive environment.

I also pass on a reminder received from a workshop on Section 504 presented by Hammonds, Sills, Adkins & Guice, LLP, Attorneys at Law. This reminder states: "The Section 504 Plan or IAP is essentially a contract. If a service is written into the Section 504 Plan and signed by a designated representative of the school system, it must be provided to the child.

The lack of staff, lack of money or unwillingness of the staff to perform the duties are insufficient to justify a failure to implement the Section 504 Plan as written. If the service is not needed, the Section 504 committee has a responsibility to address the removal of the service from the child's Section 504 Plan."

In order for the dyslexic student to be successful, they must be given accommodations that allow them to access education in the same way a non-disabled student accesses education. In this way, support leads to success, which leads to self- confidence, which leads to the achievement of a personal goal.