



Choosing a Secondary School for Students with Dyslexia or Dysgraphia

...consider this a litmus test for whether a school has a culture that understands and supports students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) well.

I'm often asked about what a good secondary school or college does in regards to how well they support students and or dyslexia and or dysgraphia. Here's my best articulation of this to date. Disclaimer! This is not polished, nor is it exhaustive. What I have to say here may get up the nose of some Secondary Schools and Colleges, but, this is a collection of my thoughts and experiences over a decade and a half of working in this space. So consider this my *litmus test* for whether a school has a culture that understands and supports students with SLDs (Specific Learning Disorders) like Dyslexia or Dysgraphia.

When first meeting with the school, you'll obviously be asking about supports they have in place for students with dyslexia or dysgraphia. If you detect an eye roll, take that as bad news from the get go. *Captain obvious speaking!* You'll want to hear them talking about **specific**, tangible supports straight away. I've listed some of these specifics below. If they look taken aback, or even seem threatened by your question, and start going on about generalized fluff like '*supporting all students to reach their full potential*' and you think to yourself '*this is like listening to a politician*', it's bad news I'm afraid.

It's even better news if the Special / Adaptive Education coordinator is full time in the role of running this centre / room and has a team working with them. I think that this shows the Principal will put their money where their mouth is when it comes to supporting kids with SLDs.

However, it's good news if the person you are talking to can talk straight away about things like:

- The school having a Special Education / Adaptive Education / Cross Curricular Centre (names will vary). In plain English – this will be a dedicated space (a hub if you like), for students with learning difficulties, somewhere in the school that is always staffed with a specially trained educator (or group of educators). Staff in this place will have the task of helping students with schoolwork, and (hopefully) even running specific evidence based intervention programs or *skills sessions* for students. In addition to this, the folks who staff this place will be able to tell you about how they communicate with all teaching staff about students' needs and supports. Schools who do this well timetable students for lessons in this centre and often also have a 'drop in' type arrangement so students can access support during breaks, before and/or after school. Now, if what is described to you has all of these features, you're dealing with the *Mercedes Benz* of Adaptive Ed. centres! Immediately ask 'where do I sign?'
- It's even better news if the Special / Adaptive Education coordinator is **full time** in the role of running this centre / room and has a team working with them. I believe that this shows the Principal will put their money where their mouth is when it comes to supporting kids with SLDs. (Listen out for any evidence that this coordinator / key person has some influence with the Principal - this is always a very good thing for kids with SLDs).
- It's a very good sign if the school proactively asks for any assessments / reports / Individual Education Plans (read down) to be sent to a particular point of contact. This indicates that they actively value and seek information about your child's learning and what has been done in previous schools to support them. It also indicates that the school has a system for making sure that information lands in the hands of those working with students.
- If there's a keen willingness to get in touch with anybody who has previously (or is currently) tutoring, or running an intervention program with your child, this is also very good news. People who work in my space know that it is

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incredibly powerful when they can exchange the odd email or phone call with teachers or other school staff about a student and what they are doing in outside intervention and at school.

- If the school has processes to put an individualized education plan in place as soon as (or before) your child starts, that will be reviewed at least half yearly – BOOM! Things are looking good. Four weeks into the term for a IEP to be *thrown together* is too late. These are important documents. You may even ask for examples (no names of course) of what one of their IEPs looks like. Good ones are very specific and measurable. They avoid general terms like *'improve'* or *'become better at'* and will be quite specific about which areas will be worked on and the hoped for goals. These goals may also indicate hoped for numerical standard score gains on standardised assessments. But – and this is a big but; because of the highly complex nature of SLDs, these goals aren't always attained. This is not uncommon. However, having a very specific goal to aim for is powerful.
- It's great news if the school has invested in training for all teaching staff on Dyslexia / Dysgraphia, how they affect students and how work can be modified for students. These are often modifications to the *mode* that students hand work up in, but should not detract from the intellectual rigour of the task. An example of a modification may be that instead of a 3000-word essay, a student may be given an option to create a 10-minute presentation with PowerPoint that will be assessed, or can storyboard and create a video on the topic. If the written form is essential, then students will need additional support in terms of composition and the actual writing process. Dyslexia and Dysgraphia shouldn't affect a student's understanding of the subject content (unless the only way to learn about is has been to read about it). These SLDs will however impact students' ability to express their learning in print – particularly if it has to be handwritten. Easy student access to a suite of assistive software such as *speech to text* and *text to speech* software is also a very, very good sign. More on this later.
- If the Principal (or who you are talking to) can rattle off some straight forward (practical sounding) examples of

Does the school have staff who can help your child learn to use assistive software and does the school has assistive software already loaded onto devices and computers? Having the software available is one thing, but students often need a high level of support and teaching in how to use assistive software. Middle school students are often very sensitive about using assistive software and looking different to their peers.

common place ways staff modify work for kids with SLDs, give them a hug. They're a keeper!

- Also listen out for how students with Dyslexia or Dysgraphia are *automatically* offered exemption from other languages (e.g. Chinese) lessons so they can instead use that time in the Special / Adaptive Education centre to catch up on other work or get support. Although your child may not want these exemptions (they may like other language subjects), the fact that they are offered by the school demonstrates some baseline knowledge about SLDs and the challenges students with them face. If instead, you hear any rubbish about how learning another language helps their brain learn English, you have a serious problem with an educator who is happy to rattle off poorly substantiated *edumyths*. This is telling. Run!
- Keep an ear out for whether extra time in tests or exams are common place, as well as use of word processors during test / exam conditions. Also if the school has a SACE / IB Coordinator who has a track record in helping families get special provisions for year 12 exams, it's hug-o'clock. if all this is mentioned unprompted, it's hug time again. Be careful to take note at this point of the staff member's level of comfort with being hugged by you!
- Does the school have staff who can help your child learn to use *assistive software* and does the school has assistive software already loaded onto devices and computers? Having the software available is one thing, but students often need a high level of support and teaching in how to use assistive software. Middle school students are often very sensitive about using assistive software and looking different to their peers. Some are convinced that this is cheating! Students often appreciate staff being discrete about this. If the person you are talking with mentions the name 'Sandy Russo' (local to South Australia) then its hug o'clock again. Sandy is director of SPELD SA and offers high quality instruction in assistive software (among other talents.) If you are outside of South Australia, your local SPELD will likely have a service that shows students and their parents what's good in terms of assistive software.

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Again, I must stress, this is by no means an exhaustive list of what you might look out for, rather, a litmus test for whether or not a secondary school is catering for students with Dyslexia or Dysgraphia.

No hugs (in fact, run) if they:

- Immediately talk about how they receive no funding for dyslexia or other SLDs and that no help is available. On your way out the door perhaps mention that the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act might deem the no funding excuse for dyslexic students to be unlawful.
- One more thing. If The person you are speaking to mentions any remediation programs they use, politely ask for the name of the program and see if there's a *Nomanis Note* on it. <https://www.nomanis.com.au/nomanis-notes>. This is a source of reliable information on the quality of intervention programs on the market. The 'What works Clearinghouse' can also help. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, all intervention programs claim to be *evidence based*. However, they vary widely in regards to the quality of research supporting their methodologies. It's worth noting that many schools are to this day investing in programs that have content and methodology based on unsupported or disproven science. Consumer reports on effective intervention programs are thin on the ground because researchers tend to test the efficacy of methods contained within programs on the market – not the actual programs themselves. Be wary of the claims made for themselves by programs. These are, after all, just marketing.

What you won't be able to do is convert a school who isn't interested in being more dyslexia or dysgraphia aware into a dyslexia / dysgraphia aware school. It will only be a journey of stress, angst and heartache and quite frankly, staff at the school will probably just start avoiding you. You have other, better places in need of your time and attention.

Sadly, in my experience to date, many schools are not yet savvy consumers when it comes to purchasing evidence based learning intervention programs. Unfortunately, teacher education just isn't that flash in this area. Through the best intentions schools can fall victim to flashy marketing and tend to go weak at the knees at anything pitched at them with the words 'neuro' or

'brain pathways' or 'neuroplasticity' and wind up spending exorbitant amounts of taxpayers' bucks on low-evidence neurobullshayte.

Time for a sobering thought. What you won't be able to do is *convert* a school who isn't interested in being more dyslexia or dysgraphia aware into a dyslexia / dysgraphia aware school. It will only be a journey of stress, angst and heartache and quite frankly, staff at the school will probably just start avoiding you. You have other, better places in need of your time and attention.

So there's a start for you. Hopefully not too many typos in this. I did use the *text to speech* function to listen back to this to find the typos and grammatical glitches, but you can't always catch them all!

Bill Hansberry

Bill has been working in the area of SLDs for over a decade and a half. Bill is the co-creator of the Playberry Structured Multi-Sensory Literacy Program and runs and teaches the popular 'Teaching Students with Dyslexia' (TSD) suite of trainings.

