

Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

Senate Inquiry

My 11 year old (Year 6 WA) son has a **hidden disability** that he and the family deal with daily. The school system exposes this disability in a way that makes him very different from his peers. My son is a **severe dyslexic with dyscalculia**. He is a friendly, kind and gentle soul that gives 110% effort at school every day despite his limited success. My son is **intelligent and capable** but is approximately two years behind his class peers in literacy and numeracy.

Dyslexia is specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (International Dyslexia Association 2014)

The current education system be it public or private do very little to support students with dyslexia/dyscalculia. My son is two years behind but little is done from a schools perspective to lessen this gap. **Dyslexia and dyscalculia are recognised as a learning disability (1992 Disability Discrimination Act) but yet receive no funding.** Without funding, that is specifically allocated to assist individuals with evidence based, systematic and explicitly taught programs success is limited and the gap widens. Schools and educators as a whole are generally poorly informed about dyslexia and dyscalculia.

Pre service teachers receive limited training in regards to Special Needs Education and even highly experienced teachers display a general lack of knowledge on how to best assist students with learning difficulties. Schools professional learning budgets are often spent on more generic programs that benefit the mainstream learner. **All schools should have mandated professional learning on dyslexia as 1 in every 10 students is dyslexic.** If every school was given a copy of the **“Outside the Square” documentary** and it was mandated viewing we may begin to see some change in our poorly informed education community. The Federal Education Minister is fully aware of this documentary. Staff need professional learning to upskill and make the necessary changes to improve the current system.

As a dyslexia/dyscalculia diagnosis does not attract funding, schools rarely put effective programs in place to address these student’s specific needs. Often band aid programs are implemented with limited accommodations or modifications making it impossible for students to access the curriculum. As parents, my husband and I have outlaid thousands of dollars to ensure we correctly identified our sons learning difficulties. My son’s school gave us little direction because of their lack of knowledge. It was my own teaching experience and gut instinct that lead to his final diagnosis. Only after years of assessments/therapy starting at 4 years of age in hearing, vision, occupational therapy, speech therapy and finally with an educational psychologists did we have an answer. We finally had a diagnosis at 7 years of age but by this time my son’s anxiety towards school had escalated to a ridiculous level affecting his everyday functioning. His **diagnosis gave him an extensive report with numerous recommendations** to support his future learning. Unfortunately **schools find it difficult to implement many of these recommendations due to lack of knowledge, experience, funding and poor management.** As the current education system does not cater for our son effectively it is vital we pay for specialist tutors that explicitly teach our son at his current level in order to lessen the educational gap. We receive no funding for this external support and cannot claim against our private health fund as these are specialist trained teachers who provide the intervention. Without these tutors my son would be further behind his peers. I spend numerous hours every day assisting my son at home academically and socially/emotionally keeping his anxiety and self-esteem in check as well as liaising with the school. I am lucky enough to have a very open relationship with my son’s teachers but they simply cannot offer what a dyslexic student requires in a mainstream class without the appropriate knowledge, support and programs.

Despite all these challenges **students in Western Australia are subject to discrimination** as they are required to sit the **Online Literacy & Numeracy Assessment (OLNA)**. If students fail to achieve Band 8 in Year 9 of high school students have six chances to re-sit OLNA throughout the rest of their high school years. Without a pass in all OLNA components these students will fail to receive a WACE graduation certificate and do not graduate. Without a graduation certificate this limits future potential for further education, employment and income.

Why are students in Western Australia the only students in Australia to be subject to these expectations? I was under the impression we have a National Curriculum yet each state still sets their own agenda. Then to make matters worse it is an **online test with no accommodations allowed**. This is **discrimination** at its worst! It is like taking a wheel chair away from a physically disabled person or removing glasses from an individual with a vision impairment. This is inappropriate and not levelling the playing field for all participants.

My sons Year 5 NAPLAN results are literacy band 3 and numeracy band 4. How can my son be expected to pass OLNA if he can't pass NAPLAN at year 5 level? No funding has meant a lack of systematic, explicit support at school level. He currently receives limited literacy support despite being in Band 3. I recently met with a high school head and head of learning support to be told some students will not pass OLNA. This is not acceptable!

Dyslexia is a hidden disability that is real and needs to be supported **appropriately by providing professional learning, intervention, instruction, modifications, accommodations and funding so students can access the curriculum with success**. All students are capable of learning if the appropriate interventions are put in place when they are first identified at risk. It is time for Dyslexia to be recognised for what it is, a **'lifelong disability'**. **Dyslexics simply don't learn the same way as the majority of students**. One size doesn't fit all and nor does our current education system.

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