Dyslexia in 2013: The Year in Review and My Wish

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Whew! I am tired. Wiped out. Pooped. Exhausted. Beat. Stick a fork in me done. I am not sure how many IEPs I attended in 2013 but it was enough to make me want to lie on the couch and eat Bon-Bons. But alas, that is not to be. And it's not because I need to take care of my own family, they would love it if I spent a night on the couch without reading a case file and randomly exclaiming, "Oh my god! Are they serious?" And while I could rest back on my laurels and be satisfied with all the good services and accommodations many students with dyslexia now have, and I could reminisce about the middle school child that I saw advocate for himself in an IEP, or think about the parents that openly wept after getting what their student needed; but I would be remiss if I didn't also notice the IEP meetings that went badly or were prolonged experiences due to misinformation about dyslexia. And I would be blind if I didn't notice that parents are contacting us more than ever desperately seeking help. So I thought I would share with you what I learned in 2013 because we need to revisit where we have been before we can plan where to go.

Middle Schools are the Abyss for Students with Dyslexia

If I had to choose the most difficult IEPs I attended in 2013, it would hands-down be each and every case we had at a middle school. These IEPs meeting were the biggest offenders in terms of their lack of understanding about how to teach reading and writing. They don't seem to understand the laws that govern testing and eligibility. They are completely remiss in their ability to remediate a student who is struggling. Just tonight I attended my second middle school meeting of the week and I heard this, "Well, the great news is that you (the parents) have taught her some great coping skills. She is able to use context clues and correctly guess at words she does not know." Yep, that's right. I actually heard this, on tape. The problem is that this student scored in the below average range in each and every phonological awareness assessment she was administered and they did not even bother to administer a spelling assessment. Of course, we will carry on with an IEE request, but why must we make this young lady take more tests in order to convince an IEP meeting of no less than eight people, that guessing is not only not ok, but that it is something that will not be a good 'coping strategy' in high school and beyond? When is enough enough?

We need to focus on the training school psychologists receive about dyslexia.

We spend a lot of time and energy talking about improving the training of our teachers, but I have heard more absurd comments from school psychologists, not only regarding how to interpret test results that might indicate dyslexia to what dyslexia is or is not but also how to write goals and how to reach reading. This alarms me. School psychologists are the gateway to special education services and potentially the academic success or failure of a student and yet they are among the least knowledgeable school personnel I have met. Try this comment on for size, uttered by a school psychologist, "Why do we need two goals for decoding and encoding? Aren't they the same thing?" How about this one, "Well, her visual perception tests were all in the average range, which is great because we know if she was dyslexic she would see things backwards." Again, I can't make this stuff up folks.

IEP meetings are the not the time and place to request an IEE or much else for that matter.

One thing I have learned for sure is that an IEP meeting is far too emotionally charged, defensive and often times too rushed to request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) or any other assessment such as Assistive Technology or Occupational Therapy. Preparation is the key for IEPs, so once you have the test results before the IEP you have a pretty good idea of what is going to go down at the IEP. My best piece of advice is to record the meeting, take copious notes (and I recommend the Livescribe for IEP meetings) and ask a lot of questions. No need to be confrontational, save that for the follow-up letters. Send a follow-up using all of the information you collected at the meeting and send to the IEP team. You, me , mom, dad and the rest of the IEP team needs time to reflect and make decisions thoughtfully; this allows everyone to do that. Trust me on this one.

If at all possible, never ever go to an IEP meeting alone.

At the IEP meeting I attended tonight, eight school personnel, including three administrators attended the meeting. When the parent saw another adult about to enter the room he had made the decision that we were going to end the meeting. He felt 'ganged up on' and frankly, so did I. Thankfully we already had a plan in place and already knew our next course of action so we didn't spend a lot of time arguing with the eight adults at the table. Instead we collected information. But it was overwhelming for the parents and he was upset. As I left an IEP last month, the dad turned and said, "Wow, I can see how parents can just get bowled over without someone there to help them through that." As happy as I am to help, it makes me sad. The fact of the matter is that it is a blatant injustice that parents feel helpless and powerless without knowledgeable support. It's just wrong.

The good.

Parents are really finding their way with all the great information on the internet.

Grassroots organizations like Decoding Dyslexia are helping parents feel empowered. Movies like Dislecksia, Embracing Dyslexia and The Big Picture are teaching parents about dyslexia and spreading dyslexia awareness. Ben Foss' new book, The Dyslexia Empowerment Plan, is a great new resource for parents to help their children embrace technology and accommodations. Parents and teachers alike can get online training in Orton-Gillingham and advocacy from the Dyslexia Training Institute which is greatly increasing the number of trained individuals that were previously prevented by geography. It's an exciting time and I look forward to what all these resources are able to do for parents in 2014.

Assistive Technology is here!

In 2013 I have noticed a marked improvement in the school's willingness and ability to provide assistive technology to children with dyslexia. They are providing Bookshare and Learning Ally (once we explain to them what they are) and they are assigning iPADS with speech to text software and giving the student the ability to take a picture of the notes on the board. It is getting better and better and easier and easier. So, that's all good.

I'm not greedy and I have only one wish for 2014. I want to walk into one IEP meeting and be greeted with this reaction from the school's IEP team:

> Wonderful. We get it. We totally get it. We understand that this child has dyslexia which is evident by their low phonological awareness scores, poor fluency and poor spelling. We understand that this child is bright and does not need a special class but needs accommodations and Orton-Gillingham tutoring. We have no intention to marginalize this student and only offer him a basic floor of opportunity in the face of his obvious intelligence. We are so glad we identified dyslexia in this child and we will get his plan in place by the end of the week. We will have his iPAD loaded with the necessary apps and after we train him and you how to use them he can start using them right away. Oh, and our teacher just finished being certified in the Orton-Gillingham approach. What else can we do to make sure your child has what he needs to academically successful?

Is that asking too much?