

Decoding Dyslexia, North Dakota

Hello, my name is Anna Hoover, and I am the outreach coordinator for Decoding Dyslexia. I have lived in Williston, North Dakota for the past five years. I was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, and moved to Williston in 2015 to work as a special education paraprofessional and taught kindergarten in Williston on an Alternative Access license in 2018-2019. I have been a part of this organization since 2019. I have dyslexia, which was diagnosed when I was four years old. Therefore, I am quite passionate about this cause.

2020 has been a year of change and challenges for us all. We were all blindsided by this pandemic that has crippled our lives, after which came a strong movement in our country for criminal justice reform. You might ask how criminal justice reform is related to dyslexia. Let me explain why I believe it is. The criminal justice system and the education system go hand-in-hand, and we can see cracks in both systems that are related. I had the privilege of speaking on the phone with William from Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana's office in November 2020, and he explained that Senator Cassidy's website states that, as defined in Section 3635 of the First Step Act, "Dyslexia means an unexpected difficulty in reading for an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader, most commonly caused by a difficulty in the phonological processing (the appreciation of the individual sounds of spoken language) which affects the ability of an individual to speak, read, and spell. Furthermore, the First Step Act, which President Trump signed into law, included my provision to screen inmates for dyslexia so they can receive the assistance they need to learn to read, reenter society, and break the cycle of incarceration" (Cassidy, 2019, p. 1). This is something that our education system is lacking with respect to the early identification of dyslexia and interventions for it. According to the Pub-med

2000 website, “Approximately 80% of prison inmates are reported to be functionally illiterate. Furthermore, we studied 253 subjects selected randomly from more than 130,000 Texas prison inmates. We found that 47.8% of the inmates were deficient in word attack skills. Word attack skills were detected in each group defined by gender and ethnicity. Nearly two thirds of the subjects scored poorly in reading comprehension” (Moody, 2000, p. 1). I believe that it is unacceptable that we have to wait for the criminal justice system to diagnose dyslexia.

The fact is that there is an unequivocal link between dyslexia and criminal behavior. The structure of society requires a person to be literate to be a functioning member of society. Given that dyslexia is the number one cause of illiteracy, it is vital to address this issue rather than neglect it if we want to help people stay out of prisons. We cannot set people up to fail when we are able to diagnose dyslexia easily and have viable treatment options.

It is clear that children with dyslexia have their own unique struggles with cognitive, personality, and mental health development (Huang, p. 2). If there is a lack of understanding and support on their parents, teachers and peers’ part, these children will grow up with emotional instabilities that are correlated directly with their dyslexia (Ibid.). Another study has also shown that children with dyslexia are more prone to such characteristics as introversion and abnormal psychoticism and neuroticism (Ibid., p. 6). Ultimately, this simply shows that children with dyslexia can develop a set of characteristics and feelings that unfortunately, those who have the power to make changes sometimes neglect systematically.

Two approaches can be taken with respect to dyslexia and crime. For those who are already in the criminal justice system, Senator Cassidy’s work with the First Step Act can provide the necessary opportunities for inmates to learn and emerge on the other side having resolved some of the issues that might have given them criminal incentives in the beginning. However, it is also

vital to offer proper support and help to those who are diagnosed. This is my ultimate goal in Decoding Dyslexia. Children need teachers who are prepared well, have the skills to address issues that arise with dyslexia, and can provide students with the tools to learn and grow beyond their diagnosis. This could inevitably solve some criminal behavior problems that arise in later developmental stages. We know that a disproportionate number of inmates are dyslexic and raising parents and teachers' awareness of the way to support these children properly in their early years could make a radical difference in reducing criminal incentives.

Our education system has failed our students, and while I understand that it is difficult to be a teacher, we need to be doing more in early childhood and elementary school to identify and diagnose dyslexia. By providing the necessary awareness, testing measures, and educational tools, a large majority of problems could be mitigated early on. The sheer amount of neglect that dyslexic children face has set them up to fail miserably when the solution is clear. Not all dyslexic children have to fall into patterns of criminal behavior; the facts are clear that supporting children at an early stage can redirect the developmental characteristics that might surface and give them their well-deserved opportunity to thrive and become active members of a society that actually accepts and helps them.