

Pushing Back:

What to Say When Your School Gets It Wrong



One of the most frustrating aspects of establishing an effective IEP is the fact that your school may not understand the law, dyslexia or its remediation. Here are some common statements made by school personnel and responses you can use.

“We don’t recognize dyslexia.”

This statement can appear in many forms. “Dyslexia is an old term.” “Dyslexia does not exist.” “We don’t use that term.” Here is what you must remember. Your school is mandated by law to recognize dyslexia. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, a child with a disability is entitled to a “free appropriate education.” IDEA defines “a child with disability” to include children with “specific learning disabilities.” “Specific learning disabilities” are specifically defined to include dyslexia.

Parent Response to School: “I appreciate your opinion on this issue, but it is really not a matter for us to decide. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act says that children with specific learning disabilities are entitled to an education appropriate to their needs and dyslexia is specifically listed as one of the conditions included in the definition of specific learning disabilities. So while there may be different opinions on this issue, one of the reasons we are meeting today is because IDEA provides a process for addressing disabilities, and dyslexia is one of the disabilities specifically listed in the Act.”

“Let’s watch the problem. These things get better with time.”

Schools will often seek to delay special services by suggesting that you “watch the problem.” They might say things like “All children develop at different rates” or “Every child will learn to read eventually.” If you have a diagnosis of dyslexia, you should quote The International Dyslexia Association on the importance of early remediation.

Parent to School: “According to The International Dyslexia Association, an organization of educators, reading scientists and professionals in the remediation of dyslexia, early intervention is the best strategy for teaching a dyslexic child to read. Research shows that delaying the intervention until the second or third grade is likely to have adverse, long term consequences in reducing the ultimate reading proficiency that a child might have otherwise achieved.”

“Our approach to teaching reading will work fine for your child.”

One of the most difficult tasks in addressing reading issues for a dyslexic child is that many schools do not have teachers appropriately trained to teach your child to read. Reading methods such as “whole language” and “reading recovery” which rely on whole word recognition are especially inappropriate for the beginning dyslexic reader. A dyslexic child needs intensive, structured phonics based reading instruction.

Parent to School: “According to The international Dyslexia Association successfully teaching reading to a dyslexic child requires specific approaches to reading instruction that emphasizes the structure of language, including the phonics, the writing system, the sentence structure and the semantics. These teaching strategies are often referred to as the Orton Gillingham method and multi-sensory reading instruction.”



“We already have too many students in special education and we just don’t have the budget to include your child this semester.”

It is true that special education can be expensive and schools face legal requirements which are not adequately funded. But under the law, a child with dyslexia is entitled to an IEP and accommodations (if required).

Parent to School: “I know you face budget issues in delivering these IEP’s. But under IDEA, if my child has a qualifying disability, we are entitled to an IEP that address her needs. This meeting is not about the cost of these services. This meeting is to establish what programming will work for our child.”

“Your child is really smart and is doing well for a child with dyslexia.”

Good grades do not preclude giving a child special education and related services as needed.

Parent to School: “Thank you for the compliment but the issue is not whether my child is keeping up. The issue is getting my child to perform at the best of her abilities. In 2012, the US Department of Education issued a “Dear Colleague” letter saying that good grades do not prevent a child from having a disability and receiving accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. So how can we determine programming that will allow my child to perform to the level of her intellectual abilities?”

“Given your child’s disabilities, you are going to have to lower your expectations.”

The question is not whether your child has a disability. The purpose of the meeting is to determine what special education and related services will help your child perform at his/her best.

Parent to School: “I understand my child has a disability. We all know that and that is why we are here. But until we have appropriate special education and related services in place we won’t really know what his/her level of performance will be. I am committed to helping him/her do as well as he can.”

“If we give your child accommodations, he/she won’t learn to read like a normal student.”

Many schools resist assistive technologies such as text to speech readers.

Parent to School: “The goal here is learning and literacy, even if it is not in the traditional form. If my child had a visual impairment, you would not oppose using Braille. How can we work together so that my child can access written content more effectively, learn his/her lessons and become a more successful student?”



“We can’t set a precedent.”

Some schools will claim that providing your child with services provided by law will “establish a precedent,” meaning that they will have to give the same accommodations to other students. If your child is entitled to an IEP and special services and the school system believes it would become a “precedent” to provide them, that may suggest that the school policy as a whole is not complying with the requirements of the law. The possibility of future programming changes for other students should not preclude the school system from acting upon the services your child is currently entitled to.

Parent to School: “The question is whether my child is entitled to an IEP and appropriate special education under the law, not whether you have provided them in the past or want to provide them in the future. My child has dyslexia, dyslexia is covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. So our discussion needs to focus on what is appropriate programming to help my child succeed. That question applies to my child or any other child in the same situation. Not whether you have provided those services in the past.”

For more information on dyslexia or The International Dyslexia Association,
please visit our website www.interdys.org.

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