



**Submission to the**

# **Minister for Education and Skills**

**on the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-2018**

**June 2016**

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## Introduction

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-18. We have identified **five key issues** which are paramount for our members with regards to the education system in Ireland. This submission aims to provide insight into the needs of people with dyslexia in Ireland and was created in consultation with those who are affected by dyslexia. It provides concrete insights into the challenges faced when trying to navigate the current education system. The figures cited are from the DAI's survey of 2015 based on a sample of 787 responses. The 'testimonials' quoted in this paper were submitted from DAI members following a request in May 2016 for their opinions in the preparatory stages of this submission.

The DAI was founded in 1972 and works with and for children and adults affected by dyslexia. The DAI supports its members by: providing information, offering appropriate support services, engaging in advocacy and raising awareness of dyslexia. Our vision is a dyslexia-friendly society where every child and adult with dyslexia has access to appropriate identification and support to achieve their full potential in education, training, employment and all aspects of life. As well as a national office in Dublin, and an adult centre in Leixlip, DAI currently has a network of 32 affiliated Branches nationwide offering local community-based services.

## Dyslexia in Ireland

450,000 people in Ireland have dyslexia (10% of the population) and therefore on average, three children in every classroom have dyslexia. Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty affecting the acquisition of fluent and accurate reading and spelling skills. This occurs despite access to appropriate learning opportunities. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a continuum from mild to severe. People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to literacy acquisition. If their needs are not identified and supported early in their education, the relative gap between pupils with dyslexia and their peers grows over time. While support at any age can help, its impact is greatest in the early years of schooling.

### DAI calls for:

1. **Mandatory Teacher Training** on dyslexia identification and support
2. **Equitable Access** to assessment and evidence-based supports
3. Review of the **Exam Accommodations Scheme (RACE)**
4. **Interagency Partnership** between DAI, DES and other relevant state bodies
5. **Services for Adults** with dyslexia

# 1. Mandatory Teacher Training




## Current Issues:

Only 30% of teachers report getting any pre-service training on dyslexia and 92% report that it did not adequately prepare them for the classroom.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is proposing a new model of Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision which relies heavily on teachers being able to identify and support students. Without a significant commitment to improve teacher training on dyslexia, there is a real risk that the needs of children with dyslexia will continue to be unidentified and unmet.

97% of teachers agree that they need and would benefit from further training on dyslexia. Every class teacher needs some knowledge on dyslexia identification and support strategies. Support teachers then need advanced training to enable them to assess for dyslexia, and provide evidence-based specialist teaching interventions.

## Solutions:

-  Mandatory pre-service training on dyslexia/specific learning difficulties for all teachers prior to full qualification.
-  Mandatory in-service training on dyslexia/specific learning difficulties for all current practising teachers.
-  Mandatory training for support teachers (Learning Support and Resource Teachers) on testing for dyslexia, and evidence based specialist interventions.

These solutions can be cost neutral and simply require a commitment within existing training mechanisms.

## Testimonials:

"All teachers should be trained in the recognition of dyslexia at an early age and have this promptly confirmed by a psychologist. Every child should have equal access and not be disadvantaged by their parents' ability to pay for this."

"My son depends on whatever teacher is available during his exempt language class - it is a bit of a lottery as to how good the specific teacher is at helping a dyslexic student - suffice it to say that some are better than others."

"[We need] mandatory teacher training, in teacher training colleges and in schools for all teaching staff. An abundance of classroom and learning support teachers do not understand what dyslexia is."

## 2. Equitable Access

### Current Problems:






Only 26% of children received public assessments (NEPS, HSE) and 74% had to seek private assessments. The average annual family cost associated with dyslexia assessment, tuition and assistive technology is €1,229, or higher again if more than one child in the family is dyslexic. 66% of families report that these costs have created significant financial stress.

Teachers need to be trained and empowered to identify dyslexia in their own schools (reducing the current mandatory need to be assessed by an educational psychologist which is driving inequity). School-based assessment can be contextualised and include regular monitoring of progress to assess students' response to interventions.

Many children have a delayed diagnosis of dyslexia, and a consequent delay in accessing specialist interventions. Research has long shown the benefits of early identification and targeted intervention. The impact of support is greatest in the early school years – we should not wait for these children to fail.

86% of teachers report that class size impacts on their ability to identify and support pupils with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Cuts to Resource teaching and SNA hours have also placed additional stresses on classroom and specialist teachers alike.

### Solutions:

-  The educational needs of dyslexic pupils can be best met by schools. Suitably trained teachers should be enabled and allowed to identify dyslexia in schools.
-  Use of early screening tests such as the Trinity Early Screening Test (TEST-2R) would enable earlier recognition of children at risk of reading/writing difficulties.
-  Specialist teaching support should be accessible to children identified at risk of reading and writing difficulties.
-  Innovative partnership at school and community level for after-school dyslexia clubs which maximises use of available existing resources.
-  Increased recruitment of educational psychologists to the National Educational Psychological Service would enable better support for schools and pupils with special educational needs including dyslexia.

### Testimonials:

“As a parent of two children with dyslexia I have found that the educational supports for a child with learning difficulties are very limited. Access to early intervention and help in school increases confidence and enjoyment of school for the child, instead of them feeling like they're a failure.”

### 3. Exam Accommodations Scheme (RACE)

#### Current Problems:



Access to reasonable accommodations in second-level examinations is inequitable due to the significant differences with the application processes and requirements at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, combined with the variation in how individual schools support students in this process.

Each year hundreds of pupils who received accommodations at Junior Certificate are refused accommodations at Leaving Certificate which causes huge frustration and anxiety. The policy and process of the State Exam Commission is flawed and this has come to light over the last four months with at least three cases of young people and their parents challenging the legal validity of decisions in the courts.

In addition in March, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted the need for increased clarity and objectivity in regard to the Irish exam accommodations system.

In an article published in the Irish Times in May of this year, DAI CEO Rosie Bissett commented "The lead-up to exams is stressful enough for young people, and especially so for those who face challenges related to disability or difference. The last thing such students should be doing, with weeks to go before their exams, is walking into the Four Courts begging for their rights to be taken seriously by an obtuse and indifferent system."<sup>1</sup>

#### Solutions:

-  Access to appropriate accommodations such as exam accommodations, Irish exemptions, etc. should be evidenced by longitudinal school-based testing, (eliminating the current mandatory requirement for one-off educational psychology assessments which drive inequity of access).
-  The application processes for RACE at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate should be unified, and pupils should be informed of the outcome of their application earlier.

#### Testimonials:

"My son was given a reader for his Junior Cert but does not qualify for one in his coming Leaving Cert. This is a big change to have to adapt to in what is probably the most important exam in your life. If you have a reader for your Junior Cert I think it should follow that you have a reader for your Leaving Cert."

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<sup>1</sup> Rosie Bissett, 'SEC decision making process failing students'. Published in The Irish Times, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016.  
<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/rosie-bissett-sec-decision-process-is-failing-dyslexic-students-1.2635154>

## 4. Interagency Partnership

### Current Problems:

The views of people directly affected by dyslexia should be sought by those involved in Government policy development. Their needs and views should be integral to policy planning. There is currently insufficient meaningful dialogue between the DAI and branches of Government. As an organisation we strive to work closely with the State in relation to these issues and to assist in creating intelligently designed, effective and cost efficient solutions which lead to better outcomes for children and adults with dyslexia.

### Solutions:

-  Regular consultation between the DAI and the Department of Education and Skills and its various agencies.

### Testimonials:

"We need a future where people have had the best chance of using their talents and strengths and the system is [currently] flawed for so many."

## 5. Service for Adults

### Current Problems:

While there is some public provision for child assessment (NEPS and HSE), there is no equivalent publically accessible assessment service for adults. NALA and the ETBs provide general adult literacy support, but their capacity to address the specialist needs of adults with dyslexia is limited.

### Solutions:

-  Access to state funded dyslexia assessment and specialist support for adults.

### Testimonials:

"I am 56 year old man who a couple of years ago decided to go to college to do a diploma in Business Management and it was during this that my dyslexia condition was diagnosed. I feel that the State needs to provide funding so the test isn't as expensive as most low paid families cannot afford it. Because of this you have people like me who had to go undiagnosed for over 50 years, stopping me from reaching my full potential in life."