Embracing Learning Differences Leads to Success

By Elizabeth Schuman, Contributing Writer

As a new high school graduate, Mollie Dickler, 18, remembers her elementary school classes. She struggled in the classroom – reading was difficult, organizing her thoughts was nearly impossible. It seemed overwhelming. No one – teachers included – understood the full extent of her learning challenges.

It was exhausting. When testing revealed that Dickler had dyslexia and executive functioning disorder, her parents hired tutors and an organizational coach. “I learned how to understand what I was reading and how to organize myself better,” she says. “I’ll never forget one science teacher who told me that dyslexia and ADHD were fake and just an excuse,” she says.

Nothing could be further from the truth, believes Ben Shifrin, head, Jemicy School in Owings Mills. “Learning differences have nothing to do with intelligence. In fact, research has shown that some of the top CEOs have learning differences. It’s about seeing the world differently.”

Blame it on biology. Some types of learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, can be inherited, though not all instances can be attributed to genes. “Our brains are wired to speak but are not wired to read,” says Shifrin. Reading is a man made construct or code rather than an intuitive action. “The majority of people need direct, explicit instruct to understand the code and succeed.” For some students, however, learning to decipher language codes is insurmountable. Estimates are that one in five children in the U.S. have learning and attention issues, according to a 2017 report by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD). This includes the 2.5 million who have specific learning disabilities like dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia and 6 million who have been diagnosed with ADHD.

Fortunately, help is available as awareness of learning differences grows. In addition to specialized programs in public schools in Baltimore and Maryland, private schools such as Jemicy School and The Odyssey School provide evidence-based approaches to help students achieve academic and personal goals.

Proud Learners

Dickler entered Jemicy School in 10th grade. “I learned that my dyslexia was not an excuse and that I didn’t need to hide behind it,” she says. “Teachers explained that everyone has different gifts and that all of us can do amazing things.” For her, it was an eye-opener. “I was so used to being in the back of the classroom and in the shadows.”

That’s an important lesson. All too often, research has found that stigma about the problem, low expectations and lack of understanding from others results in students with learning differences entering a downward spiral.

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Where to Start in Public School

As of 2016, reports the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 6.7 million or 13% of all public school students received special education services, with 34% having learning disabilities. NCES defines a learning disability as a disorder involved in understanding or using spoken or written language.

The federal government has two specific pieces of legislation centered on children with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guarantees children with disabilities have access to the same public education programs, activities and services as classmates without disabilities. For example, a child in a wheelchair needs access to a classroom. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires all eligible children with disabilities have access to a free, appropriate public education.

The public school system must provide more or different education and services to children with disabilities so that the education program is tailored appropriately to their needs. No matter the disability, the overarching concept is that students receive education in the regular classroom environment to the maximum extent possible.

Tapping into a network of services often begins with Child Find, a federal program that identifies and tests children or young adults, age three through 21, who may have developmental or physical disabilities. Educators, therapists or other health care providers, and parents work together to create an Individualized Education program (IEP), a written statement of any special education and related services tied to performance, goals and specific needs.
Assistive technology can help students who cannot process language visually. Google can read text aloud so students are able to understand information and context. “The goal of reading a book is to learn the lesson,” says Shifrin. Instead of admonishing students for answering a question incorrectly, teachers look to praise the thinking behind the answer and help students learn from mistakes.

“We teach our students to be proud of who they are.”

Good Education

Cusick notes that red flags that may reveal future struggles in the classroom. “A good preschool teacher may notice that a child is not coming along as expected and may suggest further evaluation,” she says. Some children have delayed speech or have difficulty rhyming. “We have one child who loved to be read to but would not touch the book,” she says.

The most important step is finding support from professionals, says Cusick. “Early signs will not go away. The learning gap will widen as other children learn at a faster pace.” The Odyssey School provides free screening for early language and literacy skills and signs of reading difficulty.

It’s never too early. Shifrin advocates for students with learning differences because he understands how hard it is. “My second-grade teacher told my parents that I would never amount to anything,” he says. He didn’t understand how the letters worked together to form words and sentences.

Then, Shifrin was diagnosed with dyslexia in the fifth grade. “When I met my tutor, Mr. Freedman, he believed in me.” Shifrin learned to read, found his footing in the classroom and completed bachelor’s and master’s degrees from with high honors. He’s just finished his 17th year at Jemicy as head of school.

Both Shifrin and Cusick believe many best practices for students who have dyslexia or other learning differences would benefit all students in any setting, he says. Hallmarks of these programs, such as teaching time management, organization, adaptability and flexibility enhance learning and classroom success.

“It’s not special education,” says Shifrin. “It’s good education.”

Now a Jemicy alumna, Dickler could not agree more. A self-professed “hard core math and science person,” she’s looking forward to her next step – Virginia Tech. She’s not worried. “I know how to speak up, find information and get problems solved. I learned to advocate for myself.”