



## Decoding Dyslexia Ontario

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Advocate. Educate. Empower.

Decoding Dyslexia Ontario, an Ontario-based parent advocacy group, calls on government to make pandemic learning accessible to students with dyslexia and other exceptionalities

*"I have had a horrible experience, I am finding it difficult to learn and I cannot get the help when I need it. I have an IEP that is not being used. I need to be able to communicate with my teacher without letting all 30 people in the class know my questions," I am an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) Secondary School student (grades 9 to 12)"*

*"No LST. My son has an IEP and needs more help than is possible in the virtual class, therefore I have become his LST, which is unsustainable as I work FT," parent of an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) elementary school student (JK to grade 8)*

November 18, 2020--The current reading curriculum has been inaccessible to students with dyslexia for decades. The pandemic has further exacerbated these educational barriers. Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is calling on the Ministry of Education, and Boards of Education across the province, to ensure that students with dyslexia receive the accommodations and support they need to learn and be emotionally well.

We acknowledge and appreciate the effort and personal sacrifices that educators are making to provide a safe learning environment for our children during this very difficult time. However, as we head into the second quadmester of this school year, we are increasingly concerned that the most vulnerable learners in Ontario public schools are being left behind.

These concerns have been echoed by a [new report from Abacus Data](#) that showed:

“Two-thirds of youth who are in school say the pandemic situation has made it more difficult for them to learn. And 67% are struggling to access the supports they need to learn as a result. Half have started rethinking their plans for education.”

## Key concerns

Students with Learning Disabilities, including dyslexia, comprise the largest category of exceptionalities in Ontario public schools. Parents from across the province are raising concerns about their experience with pandemic learning. They have told us that adapting to pandemic life, virtual learning, the condensed quadmester system, difficulty in obtaining educational assessments, instructional support and accommodations, has placed a heavy burden on their dyslexic children. Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is increasingly concerned that if these services are not delivered, these students will face undue pressure and gaps in their education that will affect their long-term learning and well-being.

The recent Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) back-to-school survey of parents and students illustrates our concerns. The [survey](#) showed that most parents and students appreciate the return to school and that students are engaged in learning; however, the comments also showed that a significant number of students, particularly those with exceptionalities, are struggling.

30% of virtual learners reported that well-being has worsened since returning to virtual school and 19% said that teachers are sometimes or rarely available for support when they need it. Students report feeling “stupid” and dumb,” and parents describe their learning experience as “soul crushing”, with their learning needs being “tragically ignored.”

Parents reported:

- No access to the IEP or a delayed IEP
- IEPs that are in place are not being followed
- No access to or not enough learning support teachers and none/not enough one-on-one support
- Quadmester system is posing barriers to learning; accelerated learning without accommodations and supports makes it hard for dyslexic/LD kids to keep up
- Inaccessible technologies and document formats, such as PDFs

- Lack of direct instructional support, inaccessible curriculum, and heavy workload is causing emotional distress for students (“soul-crushing”, “feels worthless and stupid”, “looking like the dumb kid”)
- Lack of communication between school and families, and lack of support, places heavy onus on parents to assist children with homework, etc.

We identified more than 70 comments by concerned parents and students; here are just a few:

**“Kids with disabilities and learning disabilities are being tragically ignored by the virtual school. These kids already struggle enough,”** parent of an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) elementary school student (JK to grade 8)

*“The accelerated learning with the virtual structure is extremely challenging for students with an IEP. **They move to another module before the student can get help and fully understands the current module,**”* an Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) secondary school student (grades 9 to 12)

*“My daughter has an IEP but is not getting much support in her two classes. Her teachers mean very well but are not able to accommodate her. **She feels "stupid" and frustrated, sometimes even afraid to go to class for fear of looking like the dumb kid,**”* I am the parent/guardian of [in-class] secondary school student (grades 9 to 12)

*“super condensed classes don't work for IEP kids; two of my kids have IEPs for dyslexia. One days worth [of] homework takes hours for them. condensing one subject 8 hours/day for 5 days is too much,”* I am the parent/guardian of a secondary school [in-class] student (grades 9 to 12)

*“The pace of a high school quadmastered course is so fast. Particularly for a course like math, this is challenging. **For a child with an IEP for extra time/slow processing this is soul crushing,**”* I am the parent/guardian of a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

*“Children with IEP and students in need of extra support have limited access to this under the current model used at my child's school. **It is these populations that are going to suffer the most during this period, but are not getting much attention and action to help them,**”* I am the parent/guardian of a secondary [in-class] school student (grades 9 to 12)

**“My child has an IEP. She has expressed that she often does not understand instructions but that it takes a long time for the teacher to get to her. Not the**

*teacher's fault. It is just that the teacher is stretched helping many other kids 1 on 1. Worried without small groups, extra support suffers," I am the parent/guardian of an elementary [in-class] school student (JK to grade 8)*

A small number of parents reported that their children are receiving support, saying that this is making all the difference to their learning and mental health:

*"My daughter has had her learning needs met by the small class sizes. Her teacher's are aware of her IEP and her learning style - she is not "lost in the crowd" anymore. I am the parent/guardian of a secondary school student" (grades 9 to 12)*

## Ensure accessibility in pandemic learning

Pre-pandemic, children with dyslexia showed very sizable education achievement gaps and outcomes in comparison with neurotypical students. This was echoed by the hundreds of parents who attended The Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) Right to Read Inquiry community gatherings that happened earlier this year. Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is concerned that the inequity we see in our education system will grow even greater during the pandemic: further widening the gap for students who can't pay for private tutoring, computers and high-speed internet.

In July, the [OHRC wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education](#) reminding it of its obligation to students with exceptionalities during the pandemic -- including access to the Empower Reading program (which has not yet consistently been made available to virtual students):

"Under the *Code*, students with disabilities have a right to meaningful access to the education that all other students receive. Education providers have a legal duty to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities who are adversely affected by a requirement, rule or standard. Accommodation is necessary to address barriers in education that would otherwise prevent students with disabilities from having equal opportunities, access and benefits."

The [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance](#) has stated that: "Before COVID, Ontario's education system had far too many disability barriers, impeding many students with disabilities. The move to online learning created even more hardships for them, and their teachers."

As we head into the second quadmester, we ask that the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education across the province address the needs of these vulnerable students by:

1. Ensuring student's rights to timely identification and remediation of reading disabilities in schools across the province
2. Ensuring that students have access to learning support teachers and one-on-one support with classroom teachers (virtual and in-class)
3. Providing greater support to teachers to deliver instruction and accommodations; for example, use data from school boards to develop tailored supports, tip-sheets for staff, frequently asked questions, and modifications to practices
4. Further exploring the data, key themes, and trends overall and within specific groups identified with exceptionalities (e.g. English language learners, lower socio-economic and racialized students)
5. Working with the dyslexia community to address the gaps and find solutions

The pandemic has highlighted the existing inequities in the Ontario education system. We hope that the Ministry of Education and School Boards across the province will work together to ensure that during this difficult time, all children, including those with dyslexia, have equitable access to the opportunities that our public schools are meant to provide.

Sincerely,  
Decoding Dyslexia Ontario

CC:

Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education ([stephen.lecce@pc.ola.org](mailto:stephen.lecce@pc.ola.org))

Marit Stiles, NDP Education Critic ([MStiles-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:MStiles-CO@ndp.on.ca))

Joel Harden, Critic, Accessibility and Persons with Disabilities  
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Ontario Human Rights Commission David Lepofsky, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance ([info@aoda.ca](mailto:info@aoda.ca))

## Background

### About Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difference that makes it difficult — but not impossible — to read, write and spell. Dyslexia is the most common learning exceptionality in Ontario schools, affecting at least 2 children in every classroom. Children with dyslexia can learn to read, write and spell with effective instruction. Yet, currently in Ontario schools, children with

dyslexia do not have access to the support they need, and show very sizable education achievement gaps and outcomes in comparison with neurotypical students.

Decoding Dyslexia Ontario is driven by families who are concerned with the limited access to interventions for children with dyslexia in our schools. We raise dyslexia awareness and empower families to support their children. We advocate for best practices regarding identification, remediation and support for students with dyslexia in Ontario schools.

Contact us:

Email: [decodingdyslexiaon@gmail.com](mailto:decodingdyslexiaon@gmail.com)

Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/DecodingDyslexiaOntario/>

## About the OCDSB survey

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) back-to-school survey asked virtual and in-person learners and their parents the following questions:

1. Students: “What are the most important things you want to share about your school experience so far this year?”
- 1) Parents: “What are the most important things you want to share about your family's school experience so far this year?”

Link to survey results: <https://ocdsb.ca/cms/One.aspx?portalId=55478&pageId=33336962>

## References

Abacus Data, Covid-19 & Canadian Youth: Impacts, Perspectives and the Recovery (<https://www.abacusdata.ca/covid19-and-canadian-youth/>)

AODA alliance statement: Ontario’s Ministry of Education Must Now Meet the Urgent Needs of A Third of a Million Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis (<https://aoda.ca/ontarios-ministry-of-education-must-now-meet-the-urgent-needs-of-a-third-of-a-million-students-with-disabilities-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>)

OHRC statement: Letter to the Minister of Education, school leaders on respecting the rights of students with disabilities ([http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/letter-minister-education-school-leaders-respecting-rights-students-disabilities](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-minister-education-school-leaders-respecting-rights-students-disabilities))