

# THE DYSLEXIA REVOLUTION

Start of School Special Edition Newsletter from The Dyslexia Initiative





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## A MESSAGE FROM DI

Well, that time of year is once again upon us...the first day of school.

I know I personally take the summer time to rest, recoup, and give my anxiety a chance to simmer down. That first school email definitely gets my blood pressure rising quickly. The first time that happens I have to take a lot of deep breaths and focus on our family unit, enjoy the quiet that remains, and mentally prepare myself to storm that hill yet again.

I call this rebirth into the new year "Phoenix Rising" so this special edition is named after my own personal mantra as I rise yet again, ready and willing to fight for my child's educational rights.

My own child so far still has his head stuck in YouTube and video games, not yet wanting to face what's pending, and that's ok. Life has a way of making us face what's in front of us when it is necessary, and for him, it isn't necessary until day 1 of the new school year.

What I want to encourage you to remember is that you are so strong and powerful. As the parent you know what's best for your child, and you're amazing. Your child is amazing and together you can do this.

For teachers, if you're following us, then you get it. You're here to support our kids, you are pursuing the science of reading, and we are grateful for you. Please use your voice to stand up for our children and help ensure #FAPE is not just achieved, but that our children learn to their potential. Your support is critical.

#LetsDoThis #DyslexiaRevolution #LiteracyRevolution #FirstDayOfSchool



# MY DEAR FELLOW TEACHER

BY: SHERRI LUCAS-HALL

My Dear Fellow Teacher.

As you return to the classroom to serve students, I want to share the story of my 5-year journey with you, in hopes that you will join me.

I began this journey in 2016, when I didn't even realize what the journey would involve. I was doing research so that I could perfect the craft that I had loved and wanted since I was a little girl with a dream. You see, I have wanted to teach since about third grade. (My family tells me it was before that because I was a mean pretend teacher. LOL!)

Anyway, my journey began because for the 5 years that I had been in the classroom, I noticed that each year at least half of my students were struggling to read. These were not typical readers. No, I noticed that at least HALF of the new students that came into my classroom each year were struggling to learn letter sounds and sight words. These struggles also translated into struggles in writing. I NEEDED to figure out why so MANY of my students were coming INTO school with these struggles. I taught kindergarten for the first 7 years of my career, and I KNEW that this was a foundational grade. There was something missing in what my teacher prep had given me. So, like any teacher who wants to perfect his/her craft, I started looking for the why. In 2016, I hadn't heard of the science of reading. I found the Florida Center for Reading Research along with Reading Rockets and both resources were showing me the importance of sounds in words and connecting that knowledge to letters and letter formation. It made sense. I KNEW that some of my students were having difficulty hearing sounds in words. I could tell during Guided Reading, because it was the instructional method I had learned about in my teacher prep coursework. I could tell when I was using the LLI books that I used with my EIP students. These were the students who struggled the most.

I asked my principal at the time if I could tutor a group of my students after school and use the research that I had discovered at the FCRR. She allowed it and I officially began this journey of learning what truly works for students who struggle to learn to read. That year I tutored 4 of the 10 students from my classroom who had struggled the most. I used the resources/knowledge that I had discovered on FCRR.org and Reading Rockets to tutor those students. By the end of the school year, each of the 4 students, who had struggled the most in my classroom, were able to read and write in a way that they had not been able to do before I began tutoring them. By that time, I had looped with those students from kindergarten to first grade, so I knew the skills they came to first grade knowing. One of the students had struggled all throughout kindergarten to learn sound/letter connections and sight words but did not know more than about 5 words. By the end of the school year, she was reading, and we both cried when she left the school a week before the school year ended.

In 2018, I read the work of Emily Hanford and knew that my journey had a true purpose. Emily put a name to the work/research I had discovered through the FCRR and it was called the Science of Reading. My journey into the science of reading would forever change my beliefs and practices as an educator.

I now know that the science of reading is over 50 YEARS of science/research that tells us how the brain processes language and the methods of instruction that BEST work for teaching students to read. This understanding/knowledge works best for ALL learners and supports the way the brain processing system works. So, the needs of those who don't struggle will be met along with the needs of those who have sound processing struggles. Our language is speech to print, and students MUST learn to connect those sounds we naturally speak to the words we read and write. For some students this connection is easy. But for those who struggle to make those connections, instruction that is explicit, structured, and cumulative is a must. They need to be explicitly taught the connections of sounds to letters. They need to explicitly be taught to blend those sounds into words. They need to be explicitly taught to read words that we call sight words using the kind of instruction that demonstrates those sound connections. They also need instruction that connects all of this to letter formation and writing.



I've used all the programs that many schools/districts currently continue to have in classrooms across this nation. I used them and realized that they weren't working well for at least half of the students in my classroom. Now I am LETRS trained, and I know what works best to support learners. What works is instruction that supports making the connections of speech to print. What works is understanding the way the brain processes language. What works is instruction that supports learners in connecting the sounds of our language to the letters that represent those sounds and then connecting that instruction to the written formation of those letters.

We cannot delay making this transition to provide instruction that is called structured literacy. It best supports the way the brain processes our language.

I'm still on this journey and I know that there is more for me to learn, but for now, I use the knowledge I've gained through my Educator's OG course and LETRS training to support the students that I serve through my tutoring business. Yes, I left the classroom. Not by choice though. I was forced to leave because I didn't have the understanding that I now have, and I failed a student in the worst way. It was unintentional failure. The kind of unintentional failure that I hear about on a regular basis these days. It was failure that happened because I didn't know what I didn't know.

I'd like to see more teachers join me in this journey to better serve students who are counting on us to save them. They want someone to save them from coming into a classroom and struggling. Some of them have been struggling for a long time. They've carried their struggles from elementary school to middle school and many through to high school and beyond. What I know is that we CAN save them. We can end the tears, stomach aches and headaches that accompany the struggles they have in classrooms across this country. We can end the frustration, anger, and withdrawal that happens because they feel like THEY are the problem. As you begin this new school year, consider joining me on this journey through the science of reading that I've learned CAN save many of the students that I've seen struggling to learn to read.

I'd like to see more students smiling and enjoying learning again. I'd also like to see more educators enjoying the profession, the profession that I've developed a new respect for. What we do IS necessary.

Sincerely,  
Another Educator on the journey

Sherri Lucas-Hall is an educator and a practitioner of the #ScienceOfReading via LETRS. She works with students who are struggling to read via her tutoring service Designed To Teach Tutoring Services.



# DEAR BALANCED LITERACY TEACHER

BY: MISSY PURCELL

Dear Balanced Literacy Teacher,

I will never forget taking my current 6th grader to his first day of kindergarten. He was wide-eyed and full of wonder. As the 3rd child, he couldn't wait for his day to join his older brothers at our local elementary school and do all the things they had done! The one thing he was most excited about was learning to read.

Our home was filled with books, and he spent countless hours in his preschool years pretending to read along with me and his brothers. As a former elementary school teacher and having already raised two proficient readers, I knew the importance of early literacy, so I read to him daily, sent him to preschool to expose him to a language rich environment, and even attempted to begin some early reading instruction at home.

Where did that land us in kindergarten? Absolutely nowhere.

He did not learn to read in kindergarten,  
first grade,  
second grade,  
third grade  
or even fourth grade.

Even though we didn't know it then, kindergarten was when he took his first steps on the road to reading failure.

He didn't learn to read proficiently until the 5th grade.

I know that might leave you scratching your head, and asking, "How did that happen?"

We now know it was the method of instruction afforded to him all those years called balanced literacy. "Balanced literacy" is a term that grew out of the "reading wars" of the 1980s between the "whole language" and "phonics-first" camps, with the idea that a combination of the two approaches would work best.

From the minute he stepped into his first classroom, he was entrenched in a world that taught him that reading was a guessing game. He was encouraged to look at pictures, first letters of word, and even skip and substitute words that didn't make sense in order to "read" the book.

According to Nancy Young's ladder of reading, roughly 10-15% of kids can figure out reading out with this type of instruction, but my child, who would later be diagnosed with dyslexia, would never be able to become a proficient reader with any version of balanced literacy. He, according to Young, like 85% of students, benefit from or need systematic explicit instruction that follows a scope and sequence with fidelity to become proficient readers and writers.

When tier one classroom instruction failed him, he moved to tier two instruction called Reading Recovery. Unfortunately, what we didn't know then, was this was just more of the same instruction, but delivered in a one on one setting.

When tier 2 instruction failed him, he qualified for an individualized educational plan (IEP) and was moved into a room where we would begin tier 3 instruction that was...

you guessed it: more of the exact same method.



Ironically, balanced literacy proponents often believe in this method under the false pretense that every child learns to read in their own unique way, and therefore teachers need a diverse set of teaching resources to support their responsive and differentiated teaching.

The irony in that belief system is that no one at my son's school knew anything about his need for structured literacy instruction. Instead we had a program in place that solely benefited the 10-15% of kids that would learn to read and write in a seemingly effortless way.

What my son needed was structured literacy instruction. Unlike balanced literacy, structured literacy is based on the science of reading and includes all the components of evidenced based instruction. Structured Literacy is explicit, systematic teaching that focuses on phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph levels. By explicitly teaching all these concepts, students who easily absorb the patterns of language will learn quickly and seemingly effortlessly, and those who otherwise struggle, like my son, will get the instruction they need early for success.

I have often wondered what someone could have said to me as a self prescribed champion of balanced literacy in my own classroom to help me fully understand that change was necessary to help every kid in my class learn to read and write proficiently.

Honestly, in full transparency, it took me stepping onto the road to reading failure with my son to actually see what was wrong with the way I had instructed kids in my own classroom and how my very own son was being failed and harmed by the very methodology I ascribed to for over two decades.

If you are serious about preventing countless kids from heading down the same road my son went down, I challenge you to do a few things in this new school year that could block that road forever.

### **1) Listen to our stories of failure.**

Get to know someone who has a child that has struggled to learn to read. You'll see that our stories are all eerily similar, and oftentimes the only way our kids learned to read is due to our non-stop advocating for evidenced based instruction. When you sit and listen to our stories, there is an empathy that no professional development course can create. When you understand, how the methods you love and can probably defend tooth and nail, are actually onramps to the reading road of failure and are blocking your understanding of what is needed to teach EVERY child to read, you will begin to change. You will see up close and personal both the academic failure and emotional trauma that is being compounded in these kids year after year due flawed instructional methods. When the correct instruction is withheld, many kids begin to display signs of anxiety, depression, and some begin to quit under the false pretense that they just can't learn. Knowing our stories could be the catalyst for change in your classroom and throughout the halls of your entire school.

### **2) Join a community of learners**

One of the biggest challenges we see is limited access to the understanding of the science of reading. Like you, I wasn't trained to teach kids to read using evidenced based practices, my education degree was centered in balanced literacy as were my summer professional development courses. I literally had no way of knowing then, what I know now. Thankfully today, there are Facebook groups, journalists, and cognitive scientists lending their expertise to educate and reframe our field's view on the way kids learn to read based on science. Find these Facebook groups or local groups of teachers and begin the slow, hard, yet incredibly urgent process of listening and learning from a growing group of experts who have come together to help us all understand what science has to say about how the brain learns to read. If your district is beginning to unpack the science of reading, listen, learn and embrace these critical professional development opportunities. What you learn could be the difference between a child's success or their failure.



### 3) Advocate for change in your own district

Getting our field of teachers to embrace these changes is akin to turning the Titanic around. It is not easy, but the cost of failure is generations of kids who are not proficient readers. Reading is a required skill to become a productive member of every community. As the gatekeepers of knowledge, we owe it to every kid that steps into our room regardless of how they arrived, to be fully equipped to teach them to decode every word in our spaces and build a rich vocabulary and prior knowledge for reading comprehension. Parents like me, some brave politicians and board of education members, are joining the fight to advocate for evidence based instruction. If teachers began this fight in districts nationwide, imagine the change we could see.

### 4) Expect every kid to learn to read.

The National Institute of Health (NIH) indicates that nearly all children have the cognitive capacity to learn to read. The estimate that only 5% of young readers have severe cognitive impairments that would make acquiring reading skills extremely difficult. If 95% of students have the capacity to read, we can no longer accept failure in our rooms. If the students in our room aren't responding to our instruction, we must change the way we teach these children.

Sincerely,

A mom determined to advocate #until**EVERY**childcanread

#saydyslexia

#structuredliteracy

Missy Purcell is a former teacher, a wife and mother. She is a convert from balanced literacy and now works to encourage educators across the country to embrace the #ScienceOfReading.



# THE 5 D'S FOR DYSLEXIA PARENTING

BY: KERRY YONUSHONIS, LCSW

It's that time of year when swim team ends, school supplies are flying off the shelves, and peaceful vacations are in the rearview mirror. School is approaching fast; younger children hope to have friends in their classes, while the older students are excited to be around their peers and away from their parents. But for our children with dyslexia, the return to school can be all the above... with a hefty serving of anxiety on the side.

Some of you may be new to the dyslexia journey and think that you have it all figured out since the time your child was diagnosed last year. For those parents many years on into this diagnosis, you realize this isn't a sprint or a marathon, but a long journey. The tricky thing with having a child with dyslexia is JUST when you think you have it figured out (the school districts, accommodations, etc.), then life changes! Our kids' age, hormones hit, and what you thought you knew- has shifted, and your foundation can feel cracked. You know that anxiety; imagine how it must be for your teen! They don't have a guidebook to get through this, so they desperately need YOU to be their guide. This means being one step ahead and able to help them understand their anxiety.

Many parents don't have the right tools to help their dyslexic children through their anxiety. They try their best but end up doing all the wrong things. For example, one of the common mistakes parents make is trying to rescue their children from BIG emotions. Saying things like "It won't be that bad" or "you probably just misunderstood them" devalues your child's feelings and doesn't help them learn to maneuver THROUGH them. So, I developed a toolbox to help parents be more effective when guiding their children through big emotions. Because let's face it, when our kids are anxious, we often become tense and cannot always think at the moment.

Knowing the 5 D's – for Dyslexia Anxiety will help YOU better parent-when things turn sideways, and you are a bit frozen. If you cannot remember them, print them off and put it on the mirror, or in your wallet for easy access ☺

## The 5 D's for Dyslexia Parenting

### 1) Discuss, don't diminish

Save space for your child to share their narrative. Don't try to jump in and solve, but listen and help them name their feelings. "Oh, you must have felt so frustrated", or "I can tell that made you really deflated" are examples of things you can say to help them understand their emotions. Avoid "It couldn't have been that bad" or "You seem pretty dramatic/exaggerated". While parents use these types of statements to try to ground their child/teen, they are just devaluing their experiences.

### 2) Don't Doubt your instincts

Sometimes our children feel shame and don't want to share embarrassing moments. Shame keeps our kids stuck in a bubble alone, trying to process big feelings. If you feel like your child is too embarrassed to talk about something terrible that happened, see if there is another trusted person they can speak to (a relative, neighbor, therapist, or even in a journal). Also, feel free to share some stories from your childhood where you felt a similar emotion—our children, and YES, especially our teens, like to hear that we also had struggles. With mental health issues and suicide on the rise, it is more important than ever to keep the conversations going.



### 3) I-Identify signs of building anxiety

Ok, so this one may not technically start with a D, but I am dyslexic so give me a free pass 😊

When working with clients with anxiety, my first question is, "Where in your body do you feel this"? Often, we miss the beginning cues and alerts our body sends when nervousness hits. Help your child better understand where they carry this stress in their body. It could be their neck, stomach, throat tightening, headaches, etc. This can help them catch it earlier and use calming skills to reduce it faster.

### 4) Defuse

It is empowering for our children to understand that they have some control over their anxiety. Practice calming and grounding skills with your child when they are NOT anxious. That way, when they are nervous, they will already have some experience using this. I created a guide to awaken our sensory systems and use our senses to "get out of our heads and back into our bodies." This free guide is available by clicking this link <https://resources.kerryoncoaching.com/grounding-guide-for-dyslexia>

An example of one of these skills is the 5-4-3-2-1 Method.

When your child feels anxious, have them find:

- 5- things they can SEE that are blue
- 4- textures that they can FEEL
- 3- things they can HEAR (car horn, refrigerator hum, etc.).
- 2- things they can SMELL (flower, candle, cat litter box, or someone's stinky feet)
- 1- things they can TASTE (the last thing they ate that they loved)

### 5) Discover their Island of Expertise

Our kids are so bright that, unfortunately, they are acutely aware of their deficiencies. They may be less aware of their passions. When they spend so much time dedicated to tutoring and schoolwork, it is essential to take time to find something they are over the moon about! This could be marine science, watches, cars, rugby, model airplanes, art, etc. You want to help your child find that one thing they love SO much that they soak it up and are the "expert in the room" on that topic. For example, if your child is into marine biology, see if you can sign them up for a summer program at the aquarium, go to the library and get easy-to-read books with fantastic imagery, like coffee table books, or dedicate time to watch Nat Geo to help them build their knowledge. Most importantly, whatever their passion is, you as a parent must also be excited to hear about it!

As we begin diving into the new school year, keep your anxiety in check. Do you have a support network of other parents whose children learn differently? Who can you speak to when you feel stressed? Have you developed any unhealthy habits to deal with your stress? Our children will pick up on it, so you might also want to try relaxation techniques from the Grounding Guide. (<https://resources.kerryoncoaching.com/grounding-guide-for-dyslexia>).

Kerry Yonushonis, LCSW  
Parenting Coach for Dyslexia  
Dyslexia Advocate

Kerry has been a mental health therapist for 18 years and a parenting coach for dyslexic families. Kerry and her teenage son have dyslexia and advocate using their "islands of expertise," which is marathon swimming. #SwimForDyslexia. For more information, please visit her website at <https://kerryoncoaching.com/>. You can follow her on Facebook and Instagram at @kerryoncoaching\_dyslexia



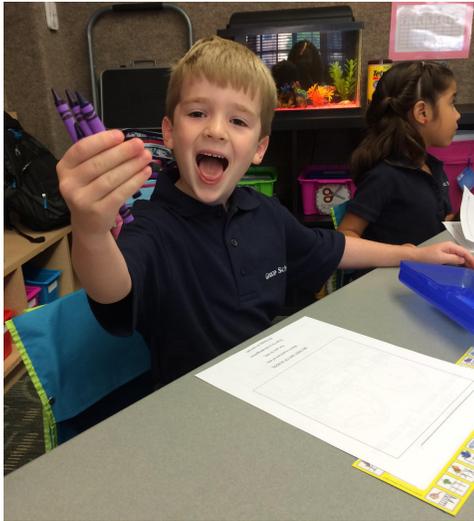
# PHOENIX RISING

BY: ASHLEY ROBERTS

I don't know why the image of the Phoenix is something I embraced, but it spoke to me and the anxiety I was feeling when it came to advocating for my child. There are times I'm energetic, driven and possess a "nothing will stop me" attitude, yet there are times when I just wish it would all stop being so hard.

I mean, it's infuriating! It's not like we as parents are asking for much. We approach this institution which we are taught to hold in high regard asking for a simple thing, for our dyslexic children to be educated. We know they can learn to read, and read well. The data is overwhelming. Why then is it such an overwhelming struggle?

Overwhelming is not an over-dramatization of the reality either. At this point I've heard from thousands of parents across the country, even across the world, and the struggle is the same and so very real. A child enters school gleeful, eager to learn, yet they are not taught and somewhere along the way we lose our happy little child.



The first picture attached is my child's first day of Kindergarten. He was so excited and eager. The second picture is the last week of 1st grade. My happy boy was long gone, embraced by the teacher who couldn't help him learn to read because she didn't have the tools to teach him. He was defeated and at barely 7 years old, screamed at the top of his lungs, "I'M JUST STUPID!"

I was devastated. No parent wants to hear those words from their bright child. This was when the fire within me ignited. Our road was clear and nothing was going to stop me from getting my happy boy back again.

Once he started to learn to read via the science of reading his confidence came back quickly. The anxiety he developed is still with him, but as I've had anxiety my whole life that may have been something he was going to struggle with anyway, but he has such an adept way of explaining the anxiety he feels; for example, when it comes to writing assignments he told me, "first I have to think about my handwriting, then I have to think about my spelling, so by the time I get to the actual writing part I'm already exhausted."

This example shines a bright light on the lack of explicit written expression instruction within the American classroom. Sorry to tell you folks, but Writers Workshop is not a model that will ever teach a child how to write, not without a major overhaul that includes explicit handwriting instruction, explicit grammar and syntax instruction, and vocabular development via a content rich approach to teaching writing.

But, back to my point. Have I always known how to advocate? The answer is an emphatic **NO**.

This has been a major learning process that tapped into every insecurity I possessed. I constantly feel afraid of failing my precious boy, of not getting him what he needs. I am have spent years asking myself is this really working, is this too much, too little too late, will he be able to succeed on HIS TERMS which is all I've ever sought for him? How do I keep him intact, meaning how do I assure him that we will get through this together and he won't be damaged by the system? How do I teach him that his grades don't matter, that it's the effort that counts? How do I raise him to be a non-conformist in a system that DEMANDS CONFORMITY? How do I teach him to stand facing the wind and rain and have the faith that he will get through this?

Public school is not for the faint of heart. Despite the rising anxiety I developed a mantra that I repeated to him every day for a year. I hoped it would bring him strength in the face of challenge. It goes something like this:

**This place does NOT get to define you.**  
**They're going to try.**  
**They will tell you who they think you can and cannot be,**  
**what you can and cannot achieve,**  
**what your limits are,**  
**what you excel at,**  
**where you fall short,**  
**and for the most impressionable years of your life**  
**it will be easy to believe them.**  
**It will be hard to be other than what they define you to be,**  
**but, at the end of your long life, when you look back on this time,**  
**this place will have been such a small part of your life,**  
**and if you give them the power to define you, that power will endure forever.**  
**And if you can accept that, then know this...**  
**they do not know what you are really capable of.**  
**All they know, is how well you did or did not do on a test when you were a CHILD,**  
**and all a test is, is a sample of a moment in time, which in the scheme of things,**  
**means nothing.**  
**The beauty of your life must be defined by YOU**  
**and it is in YOU, through YOU and in who YOU CAN BECOME**  
**that you will find who you really are capable of being.**  
**No one else will travel YOUR ROAD of life, but YOU.**  
**Only you.**  
**So, do not let this place, these people, define you.**  
**They do not have the right to limit who you can be.**

I repeated it until he told me to stop saying it to him, that he had it, that he knew and understood. That didn't stop the anxiety though. When your child is hard wired for it, or even if they aren't they're just extremely intelligent and know they don't fit, that anxiety creeps in anyway, they are going to feel it no matter what we say or do.

Do I get tired? Oh, man. Some years are harder than others. Some years I've celebrated big wins, and some years I've lost hard. I have had an IEP meeting that lasted the entire school year, and no, I'm not kidding. I lost, but I made them fight for that win. The reason they fought so hard was I had won more for my child than anyone else in the district, and when they pieced that together, they fought like the devil to take all of it away, and take it away they did. This is despite evaluation results that would make some people's heads spin, but what that is evidence of is how desperately my district **DOES NOT UNDERSTAND DYSLEXIA OR ANY OTHER SLD.**

I've also fallen into a massive depression that was very hard to pull myself out of. Unfortunately I also had little emotional support from my dyslexic circle during this time with the exception of only two friends, and sometimes that's not enough. Like with all things, in time I healed and picked myself back up again with a plan of action. I am currently in the middle of that plan so I can't report on the rewards yet, but both my son and I can plainly see them.

The lows are when it's hard to rise, but rise we must. Every time I get low, or burned out, it is a struggle, but I do find a way to rise. My son needs me to rise. My job as his mother is to ensure I get back up every single time and keep going. Usually once I get going though, I find my passion for this battle rekindled.

And then two weeks ago, when my anxiety was re-triggered by an email from the school, my son surprised me in such a way that the fire within lit with a fury, and I rose with a smile on my face, a skip in my step, and glee in my heart, and he achieved that with one small declaration.

**"Mom, warriors make warriors, and you are a fierce warrior. Everything I've achieved is because of you and Dad and all that you fight for, but because I'm the one that's dyslexic, I will be even more ferocious than you. No one will be able to win against me. I will change this world."**

Can you imagine what that did to my heart and soul?  
 Can you imagine my awe at my amazing child?

#IAmThePhoenix #Rise #DyslexiaRevolution  
 #LiteracyRevolution #DysgraphiaRevolution

