

Helping Students with Dyslexia

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There have been many studies in recent years on brain development which have tried to get to the bottom of how we think. Much has been written about cognition and meta-cognition and many scholars and researchers have shared their own "thoughts about thinking." One thing is certain, each of us is a unique child of God and each of our brains has developed differently-at varying rates and with distinct abilities.

In 2015, a generous donor on a mission reached out with an offer to the Department of Catholic Schools. He had a very specific reason to extend his offer – dyslexia education. Research has shown those who have dyslexia have brains that work differently from others. It most certainly is not a case of a lower intelligence level or a lack of an ability to learn. The simple fact of this complex matter is that those with dyslexia have brains that function in a different way. Teachers must be provided with the tools that help them to tap into that "different way" of thinking so that they can better help the students with these challenges.

Activities such as reading and doing mathematics can often be a very frustrating challenge for children in school. This donor has seen that frustration first-hand. He and his wife wanted to send their children to Catholic school because they believe in what it has to offer. Unfortunately, they could not find a school staffed with teachers equipped with the skills necessary to help children who are dealing with dyslexia. He contacted JoAnn Tier and then came to the Chancery to speak with several members of the Department of Catholic Schools about the growing need for dyslexia education. He and his wife generously offered to provide a grant for teachers to receive education to help them to help the children in our schools who may think differently than other students.

The Society for Neuroscience tells us that "In a world where reading and writing skills are in increasing demand, the impact of dyslexia on individuals—and on U.S. society—can be devastating. About 80 percent of learning disabled children eligible for special education services have significant reading difficulties, including dyslexia. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the high school dropout rate for students with learning disabilities is more than twice what it is for other students (36 percent compared with 14 percent). One study is currently tracing individuals from age 5 to their late 20s and will look at the costs of dyslexia to society as a whole, especially in terms of intervention costs and employment opportunities."

In the summer of 2017, nine teachers from six schools of the Diocese attended a week-long workshop at the Cooper Health System in the Orton-Gillingham Program to assist students with dyslexia and other reading challenges. The cost for this seminar was covered by the grant funding provided to the Department of Catholic Schools. This program was expanded in the summer of 2018. Miss Kathryn Besheer, Principal of Sacred Heart School in Mount Holly, who attended the seminar in 2017, decided to offer this workshop to members of her faculty and kindly opened this opportunity to all teachers in the Diocese. During the week of June 18, 2018, thirty-seven teachers from fifteen schools attended this workshop led by David Katz, a Fellow of the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Educators and Practitioners.

Miss Besheer used Title funds, provided by the state, to fund most of the \$5,000 needed to provide this opportunity for professional development for dedicated teachers who wanted to spend some of their summer vacation in school. The Department of Catholic Schools provided financing to pay nearly \$4,000 for the materials used in the course. Regarding this workshop, one of the participants, Jennifer Graja from St. Paul School in Princeton, shared this, "The training that we received with David Katz was perhaps the best that I have ever taken part in. I truly mean that. He was exceptional and provided all of the teachers enrolled with so many practical and very targeted ways to improve Language Arts instruction at multiple levels. The time invested was so incredibly worth it. Our students will benefit greatly."

Because the response to these workshops from teachers has been so positive, the Department of Catholic Schools has organized a program through which the teachers who attended these seminars can continue their studies to attain classroom teacher certification in the Orton-Gillingham Program. Twenty-five teachers have committed to participate in the practicum which will provide this certification.

While this practicum brings with it a hefty price tag of over \$16,000, funding provided by the Department of Catholic Schools, the Foundation for Student Achievement, and the Diocesan PTA will cover most of the cost. Each school participating school will be asked to submit a minimal amount to assist in making up the difference.

The Department of Catholic Schools currently plans on offering this program again next summer, so that even more of our teachers will have the necessary tools at their disposal to assist students who may have reading challenges. While financially the cost may be high, this is most certainly a worthwhile cause that will make a true difference in the lives of many of our students for years to come.