

# BC Doesn't Know How Kids with Dyslexia Are Doing in School

The province doesn't track or specifically support students with the most common learning disability.



**Katie Hyslop** / Yesterday The Tyee

Katie Hyslop writes about education and youth issues for The Tyee.



Advocates say early diagnosis is key to helping kids with dyslexia catch up with their peers. Due to wait-lists in BC, however, it's common for kids to have to wait until Grade 4 or later to be assessed. Photo by Skolova via Shutterstock.

When the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth released a report on the support for kids with disabilities in B.C. last month, it focused on the unmet needs of kids with neurological, physical and developmental disabilities such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and autism spectrum disorder.

“Still Left Out: Children and Youth with Disabilities in B.C. ([https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RCY\\_Still-Left-Out\\_Nov2023-1.pdf](https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RCY_Still-Left-Out_Nov2023-1.pdf)) ” is a critical followup report on the provincial government's continued insufficient support for kids with disabilities in education, in health care and at home.

It arrived three years after the representative's office released (<https://rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/cysn-report/>) a similar report in 2020 on kids and youth with disabilities falling through the cracks of the provincial pandemic response.

But an anonymous respondent to a survey of parents of children with disabilities who is quoted in the representative's latest report touched on another area drastically undersupported in B.C. schools: learning disabilities.

“Learning differences are not being properly funded or supported in public schools,” reads the quote. “Waiting until Grade 4 for a school-based psych evaluation — when it is well-known several years prior that a child has a learning disability — is ableist, traumatizing, and sets the child up for being years behind their peers, which impacts their mental health.”

While children in B.C. can be assessed for learning disabilities as early as kindergarten, there is no set age or grade that children must be assessed by. Because of assessment wait-lists, it's common for families to have to wait until Grade 4 or later, when education has become more academically challenging.

While the Ministry of Education and Child Care publicly reports the education outcomes of kids with disabilities, it lumps all disabilities together, making it impossible to tease out how kids with learning disabilities, including dyslexia — the most common learning disability — are doing in school.

But anecdotally? Kids with dyslexia could be doing so much better than they are, says Cathy McMillan, a founding member of the grassroots organization Dyslexia BC, which advocates for people in the province with the learning disability. McMillan and her two adult children have dyslexia.

While a recent Dyslexia BC report (<https://dyslexiabc.ca/reports>) on education outcomes for people with dyslexia did not mention the pandemic, the sudden transition to online learning for all students in spring 2020 and the occasional disruption to in-person schooling thereafter was hard on dyslexic students, McMillan said.

Kids learning online might have had the opportunity to record classes and play them back, an adaptation some people with dyslexia may use, McMillan told The Tyee.

But you can't replace the human side of in-person learning, she said.

"Part of being at school is being social, having that human interaction. If you have a language-based learning disability, part of communication is body language," McMillan said. "It's a lot harder to pick up those cues online.

"Also, the child with the learning disability can't see what their peers are doing: 'Oh, I'm supposed to pick up my pen now.'"

Rachel S. Forbes, executive director of Learn Develop Succeed, or LDS, a non-profit charity that provides one-on-one academic and social-emotional support for people with dyslexia, acknowledges early pandemic schooling was tough for dyslexic students. But she says that the temporary transition to online learning is only one of the compounding issues facing students with dyslexia today.

"We don't necessarily see a marked difference in where children and youth are at," Forbes said.

"I think what we see most, a result of the ongoing pandemic effect, is the compounded effects of physical health, and the stresses that puts on families; financial health, and the stresses that puts on families; and then mental health implications of that."

### **The importance of early diagnosis and intervention**

While learning disabilities are included in the special education categories recognized by the Education Ministry, the province does not provide funding to districts to support students with any learning disabilities.

As "Still Left Out" notes, it has been over a year since the province paused (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/b-c-kids-with-disabilities-want-similar-support-as-kids-with-autism-1.6668253>) an overhaul of the children and youth with support needs services provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. No new funding formula or support strategy for these children has been announced.

Despite a successful discrimination suit (<https://bc.ctvnews.ca/school-discriminated-against-dyslexic-boy-supreme-court-1.1031962>) brought by a parent of a dyslexic child against the North Vancouver School District over a decade ago, the Supreme Court of Canada did not find the Education Ministry had discriminated against children with dyslexia.

That means that while the family who sued the district was reimbursed for the private school tuition they paid after the district closed a support centre for kids with disabilities, the Education Ministry did not have to fund dyslexia supports, McMillan said.

"The ministry has to be driving the bus; they have to be driving the change," she said. "They have to be setting policies and making sure these kids get [assessed] early. As early as kindergarten."

Both McMillan and Forbes agree that early diagnosis and intervention are needed to help kids with dyslexia catch up with their peers before school work becomes heavily academic.

Ideally students would be assessed by a psychologist in kindergarten, McMillan said, but definitely before Grade 4.

"My kids are both fantastic writers, but I think it's because they were both diagnosed early," she said.

"Your brain is a muscle. The plasticity of the brain for remediating dyslexia significantly goes down by the time they hit Grade 4," McMillan added.

Dyslexia BC's 2022 survey of primarily parents of kids with dyslexia found two-thirds paid for private psychologists to assess their kids, which McMillan said costs thousands of dollars per test. Anecdotally, she said, the wait-lists for private assessments can be years long, too.

A quarter of respondents said their kids were assessed through the school district, while another 10 per cent had yet to be assessed at all.

Kids are not diagnosed with a learning disability before they are school age, Forbes said. But signs of learning disabilities like dyslexia can and do show up early.

"That's why we support children as young as three... so that we can help with early screening and identification of learning disabilities," Forbes said, adding this can help set children on a "better trajectory for life."

“You can get a sense of if there’s developmental delays that we can intervene with and try to support the family, and get them set up pre-kindergarten.”

### **No extra funding earmarked for kids with learning disabilities**

A dyslexia diagnosis entitles a student to an individual education plan, or IEP, which highlights the supports, adaptations and learning goals for each child with a disability or diverse ability diagnosis.

Developed by teachers and support staff, IEPs are supposed to be updated annually. However Dyslexia BC’s 2019 survey found just over a third of parents reported their child’s IEP was not consistently followed at school. Another 16 per cent said IEPs were not updated annually.

The Tyee requested an interview with Education Minister Rachna Singh about the pandemic impact on kids with dyslexia and the lack of funding for their support in school. But she was not made available.

According to a background statement the ministry emailed to The Tyee, in spring 2020 school districts offered in-person learning opportunities for kids who struggled with online learning, as well as for the children of emergency responders. The ministry also divided \$25.6 million among 60 school districts in the 2020-21 school year for helping students who fell behind because of the pandemic.

While funding for schools for supporting kids with disabilities overall increased by \$88.9 million in the past year to a high of \$846 million annually, none of it is specifically earmarked for learning disabilities.

Decisions around how to spend this funding are made at the school district level, and support, like hiring education assistants, can vary based on a school’s population of kids with disabilities.

According to the ministry, districts are expected to report to the ministry annually on how students with disabilities and diverse abilities are doing in school, as well as any strategies they have taken to improve students’ education outcomes.

Overall the ministry says graduation rates for students with disabilities increased to 77 per cent from 63 per cent over the last decade. However, this includes students with a broad range of physical, developmental and neurological disabilities and diverse abilities that may or may not affect their outcomes.

The province released a report (<https://studentsuccess.gov.bc.ca/pdf/student-impacts-report-feb2021.pdf>) in February 2021 that found during the first year of pandemic schooling, all students with disabilities, as well as Indigenous students, students in the child welfare system and low-income students, had disproportionate rates of absenteeism, not graduating on time and quitting school.

A followup report has not yet been released. The impact of pandemic schooling on students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia, was not examined in the provincial report.

Despite how students with dyslexia may have struggled, neither Forbes nor McMillan thinks there is anything school districts or the ministry could have done differently in the early days of the pandemic.

Instead, they re-emphasized the importance of testing kids for learning disabilities as early as possible. McMillan also added that the ministry could better help kids by using research on the science of reading (<https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/>) that can help all kids, regardless of whether they have a learning disability, to become literate.

Based on decades of research from varying scientific fields, the science of reading is not a program but a teaching approach (<https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/science-reading-basics>) that focuses on vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonics and phonemics.

“Part of the science of reading is actually screening for reading levels, and then you use that data to help target the interventions, even if the child doesn’t have dyslexia,” McMillan said. ■