

Our local highschool has a program in place to assess all students upon entering the school. The assessment is to determine if any students have a literacy/numeracy deficiency, either a reduction in their ability or a reduction in their potential (this being one factor crucial factor in teenage development). A group of parents, students and a teacher from Alstonville High School were recently invited by Professor Paul Whiting of Sydney University to a parents and teachers conference group discussion. The response to our presentation (outlined below) was for Professor Whiting to suggest that our program now be put forward as best practice for assisting students with Dyslexia in the Australian school system. A problem which affects 10% of our population.

Upon entering high school students are given a class by class evaluation sheet to fill out, simple questions which require a tick in a box eg do your eyes hurt when you read, do you "enjoy" reading. The questions are read out to the class and the special needs teacher takes them away for appraisal. Should any student show signs of further investigation a face to face assessment takes place after written permission has been obtained from the parents, should more investigation be required the student is assessed by the school counsellor or a private practitioner specialising in dyslexia or other appropriate professional.

From this point a student would then be placed on an LD (learning disability, you can't call it dyslexia) list because in the New South Wales Department of Education and I believe in other states since the 1970's it is inappropriate to label students. This idea probably had good intentions as other things in our past but to try and assist or diagnose a problem without giving it a diagnostic name creates its own dilemma. All that said, students who find themselves on the list are now in a position to receive the most meaningful assistance in their whole school career. Many have already been through reading recovery programs etc. Many or in fact most have already experienced low self esteem, segregation and powerlessness.

Once a month at lunchtime a peer meeting is run by a teacher where students meet to discuss what they are experiencing, the older students encourage the younger ones. Their discussions cover topics such as exams, experiences in class with teachers and solutions on how to solve their individual needs, as most of the older students have already been through many of the same situations. Skills are passed from one generation to the next. All with the oversight of a teacher being present. The students learn correct social empowerment.

Once a month after school the parents meet to discuss similar issues, a peer forum, again with a teacher present on how best to deal with our special children. Communication lines and responsibilities are established on how best to deal with situation which may arise and the requirement of the Board of Studies for external examinations.

Once a student is assessed they receive the appropriate provisions they may be coloured paper large print, coloured glasses, and where required a reader and/or writer for their examinations. The scribes come from the local community which are scheduled and organised by the parents group. The benefit from this is not only for the students the scribes often relate to the joy of students who are receiving help, on a one to one basis. The students appreciate an adult giving up their time to read for them this is viewed with much appreciation and an improved feeling of self worth by students.

The whole atmosphere of the school is positive, there is less violence and a willingness to achieve is part of the school culture. Teachers are also on the look out for students who may benefit from being on the program and will refer where they think necessary. Many students on the program have gone onto university to study had they not been on the program they would have been high school drop outs.

I write this with personal experience, my daughter is fortunate enough to attend Alstonville and has benefited from her involvement. School has been a pleasure and positive experience. Unfortunately, this is not always the case out of the three families who attended the conference one had been touched by a cousin's teenage suicide, he no longer could cope with the frustration of school, another a brother who was coping with drug and legal problems and the third a brother who was nearly destroyed by the school system.

The system the way it is at the moment does not help, it was only in the last few weeks yes weeks that the NSW Ed Dept has allowed teachers to refer students for Irlen lens diagnosis, (the coloured glasses which help many students so effectively) until then it was illegal for them to do so.

Perhaps you might like to take the time to speak with Larry Anthony who has spent time with the students both boys and girls, he has witnessed their heartache before being on the program. These children do learn differently and there are many suggestions for alternative learning styles which can be integrated into the current curriculum.

I have presented you with a solution, I have seen it work, it is just the beginning.

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