

Testimony of Debbie Edwards  
Resident of Richardson, Texas 75080  
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! I am Debbie Edwards, wife of, mother of, sibling of, grandchild of, aunt of, friend of, teacher of, and maybe (I do not know yet) grandmother of individuals with dyslexia. My home life revolves around loved ones with dyslexia and my work as the Coordinator of Curriculum and Outreach at Shelton School and Evaluation Center is related to dyslexia. I have taught in both public and private schools over the course of 35 years. I am certified as an Elementary and Early Childhood teacher and Principal by the State of Texas, am certified as a Montessori teacher by the American Montessori Society (AMS) and I am a Certified Academic Language Therapist.

I would like to begin by telling you a little about my family.

My mother, an English/Early Childhood Education major, prepared a language rich environment in our home. She also provided a wealth of hands-on materials and activities. I am the oldest of eight children. This environment seemed to work very well for me - I was reading by the age of three!

As a child, I thrived while I traveled through time and around the world, learned about inspiring people, and discovered the world around me – a wonderful world – one that was created through books, stories, poetry, and all things written – my siblings did not.

Even though my mother continued the same language rich environment and experiences during their early years, reading was a mystery to most of them when they went to school. Only two of the eight of us are not dyslexic. One of my sisters is dyslexic and the other became legally deaf due to a high fever at the age of 18 months, received speech therapy for many years, and today she holds a Masters degree in Library Science and is the head of technical services at a large library in Oklahoma.

My mother did not give up on any of my siblings and worked hard with each of them to find programs to help them. Her search began in the late 50's with my oldest brother and went into the 90's with my youngest brother. They all eventually learned to read and write – though spelling is still a mystery to most of them – and they have become productive adults. They have found careers in the arts, computer technology, and law enforcement.

I firmly believe that may not have happened had my mother not provided a rich, multisensory language environment from day one AND searched out multisensory, structured language programs to help each of them. Early intervention is essential.

But the story did not begin with my siblings.

My mother's dad, Grandpa Puckett, quit school after 6<sup>th</sup> grade to work on the farm. Later he joined the Army and after the war worked for the Army Corp of Engineers laying gas lines all over the south. As a child I remember that my grandfather traveled a lot inspecting the gas lines for Texas Gas.

Then, I was in junior high, he made a big decision – he wanted to travel less. That meant that he needed to take a job in management with the company. It turns out that it also meant a lot more - he would have to read and write if he wanted the job.

Grandpa was one of the smartest men I knew. He was a Sunday School teacher for an adult class and he seemed to know everything about the Bible! Everyone in their community looked up to him.

You see, Grandpa had a great capacity for memorization and a strong desire for knowledge – that is how he taught Sunday School classes for so many years. He had a reel-to-reel tape set of the Bible, Billy Graham on the radio, AND my grandma to read the lessons to him!

He went through an adult literacy program with a volunteer, one-on-one, at the local library. He learned to read and write and got his GED! AND he became a manager! That really made an impression on me! He worked extremely hard and spent a lot of time away from the family, but he felt that it was worth it!

Since there was a long family history of dyslexia on my side of the family and, as it turns out, a long history on my husband's side of the family, we saw early warning signs in kindergarten with our youngest child, Jim. We had provided the same language rich, multisensory environment for all of our children, however, Jim did not know the sounds of the alphabet by the time he reached first grade. We proceeded to have him tested and we were told that he was severely dyslexic.

We knew that early intervention was the key to his success. He attended special classes and schools, worked with tutors, used

accommodations in classes, and he still struggles as a college student. Just last year, when he was taking a literacy course, he called to tell me that he “discovered” that he was literate! He went on to describe the class activity. The instructor asked them to raise their hands if they thought they were literate – he did not raise his hand. Then she asked a series of questions, such as, “Do you read magazines? Do you look for information online? Do you read newspapers?” Each student counted the positive answers – Jim had enough to be considered literate! This was a revelation to him. He immediately began thinking of ways that he could include literacy in lesson plans for the classes he will teach when he graduates and becomes a teacher.

Yes, Jim plans to become a teacher! He now has one semester of college remaining – student teaching. His strong work ethic and a great desire to become a Physical Education teacher and a coach have gotten him to this point. One major obstacle looms ahead of him – the State of Texas exam for teachers. Luckily the laws have changed and he will be able to take it with accommodations – after he reads, completes, and submits a 22 page packet/form and documentation of the need for accommodations.

Would he be at this place educationally today if he had not experienced early intervention? Probably not! Does he still need literacy services? Yes! The first thing he did was to ask for help in reading and comprehending the 22 page packet that he need to complete so that he can have accommodations on an exam that will determine if he is able to achieve his dreams and teach in the state of Texas.

Your child or grandchild could be lucky enough to participate in one of Jim's classes or play on one of his teams in the not so distant future! I do believe that he will persevere and become a teacher and coach. He loves students, sports, and life – he will be a fantastic teacher!

There are many other potential teachers, coaches, computer programmers, artists, managers, mothers and fathers that did not have the early opportunities that members of my family were given to learn to read and write. The juvenile court system and adult prisons are full of functional illiterates and those who cannot read and write.

What is the solution? How will they reach their potential if there are not adult literacy programs readily available to them?

I have looked into adult literacy programs in my community. The ones I found are mostly ESL (English as a Second Language) adult literacy programs. These are desperately needed and extremely useful. However, the English-speaking, non-reader has few places to go for assistance. The few programs that do exist work with adults in a group setting, not one-on-one, which is optimal.

At Shelton School we have worked with several adults in a one-on-one sitting through our Adult Scholars program. Some attended the Saturday program with younger students. In that situation we provided a separate room in which they worked with their tutor. For a while we offered a weeknight program. One thing that we have found is that it is difficult to get the information about our program out to the "non-reading" public.

LIFT (Literacy Instruction for Texas) offers tutoring in a traditional classroom setting to adult learners, 18 years of age and older. Bob Brooks facilitates monthly meetings for those with dyslexia through the Dallas Dyslexia Information Group (DDIG). They meet at the Winston School. These programs are all important and help meet some of the needs of the adult seeking help to improve their skills.

In the state of Texas, literacy programs help less than 4% of the 3.8 million in need of adult basic education services – how sad!

I recently heard the story of a literacy coach in California. His 45-year-old adult pupil thanked his coach for helping him learn to read. With tears in his eyes, he told the coach that he was thrilled to have been able to cast his first ballot in an election. He had been unable to vote because he could not read the ballot!

An informed citizenry is essential to the growth of our state and our nation. Many students have “slipped through the cracks” of the educational system. They were not identified at an early age or, if identified, they were not provided the appropriate instructional setting in which to learn and grow. They are now adults – will you help to insure that they receive the education that every Texan needs to prosper in the great state of Texas?

Thank you for your time. I hope and pray that you will accept this important challenge - to provide and fund literacy programs for our Texas friends, neighbors, and family members that are struggling to read and write.



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