



DYSLEXIA VICTORIA SUPPORT (DVS)

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VICTORIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

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Contact



<http://dyslexiavictoriasupport.com/>



“I am honoured to be asked by Dyslexia Victoria Support to open this submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. My research over the last twenty years with young people in the youth justice and out of home care systems confirms the existence of what has been described in the USA as a “school to prison pipeline”.

There is a significant subgroup of children, across all socio-economic strata, who struggle to make the transition to literacy in the early years of school. A small percentage of these (probably fewer than 5%) have an intrinsic, often heritable learning disorder that predisposes them to struggles with reading, writing, and spelling. A larger group, however (some 15-25% of students, possibly more) experience learning difficulties rather than disorders, and in many cases such students are instructional casualties – they have been taught by well-intentioned but under-prepared teachers, and as a consequence have not made the transition from a biologically natural process (speaking and listening) to one that is biologically unnatural – reading, writing, and spelling.

The literacy skills of such children fall further and further behind relative to their age-peers, and they are prone to developing both internalizing (anxiety and depression) and externalizing (conduct and attention) mental health problems. Having failed to learn to read, school becomes a source of daily misery and distress. Such students exit school early, unable to transition to higher education or further training. Some end up in literal prisons, while the majority are sentenced to metaphorical prison sentences on the social and economic margins. It is extremely difficult, for both pedagogical and psychosocial reasons, to “retrofit” literacy skills into psychologically distressed and angry 15 year olds.

The only meaningful way of redressing the prevalence of comorbid low literacy and mental health problems is to ensure high quality mainstream instruction is available as a matter of social equity, in all classrooms across the state. I commend this submission to the Royal Commission and hope the Commissioners take seriously the important issues that it raises.”

Professor Pamela Snow, FSPA, MAPS, Head, La Trobe Rural Health School, Bendigo, Victoria



Introduction to Dyslexia Victoria Support (DVS)

DVS is a parent-led, non-partisan dyslexia support group that endorses evidence-based teaching approaches and programs that have been independently, scientifically peer-reviewed and published in reputable scientific journals. In 2014, Heidi Gregory and three other mothers were looking for answers to their children’s reading difficulties and realised that there was no local support. This prompted them to create DVS as a way to connect with other parents in the same situation. DVS’s membership has grown to over 4500 parents, teachers, and allied professionals all with the shared goal of ensuring all children learn to read at school.

Dyslexia can be defined as, “A specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and / or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.” (1)

Why Has DVS Made a Formal Submission to this Royal Commission?

This submission is written by parents with lived experience of having children with reading difficulties and mental health issues. In our experience, **children with reading difficulties are at risk of poor mental health outcomes**. We have first-hand experience of how our education system both perpetuates reading failure and fuels consequent mental health issues. Our children’s mental health issues stem from their struggle to acquire reading skills in pace with their peers and are exacerbated by the systemic failure in our Victorian education system to provide effective, evidence-based reading instruction in their early years.

DVS – Response to Questions

1. What can be done better to prevent mental illness?

DVS parents of children with reading difficulties report anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, stomach aches, headaches, vomiting, school refusal, ostracism, name-calling such as ‘stupid’ and ‘dumb’ and suicidal ideation. They also express their children have feelings of fear, sadness, anger, frustration and shame directly related to their reading difficulties and their school environment. (2)

In the 2017 Victorian study ‘*The experiences of parents of children who have dyslexia in Victoria, Australia: a social justice perspective*’, Dr. Katherine Levi found, “Parents commonly expressed concerns about their child’s low self-esteem and, in some cases, manifestations of depression...parents perceived school attendance as



detrimental to the child’s welfare. Parents also relayed their distress in relation to incidents of bullying of their children by their peers. This included mocking, belittling, negative labelling and social isolation.” (3) The relationship between reading difficulties and mental illness is under-researched. Nonetheless, Dr. Kerry Hempenstall suggests, “One obvious candidate for a causal link involves extended failure caused or exacerbated by inadequate instruction, particularly in that first big educational hurdle – literacy development”. (4) Dr. Kerry Hempenstall provides a summary of the emerging evidence base on reading difficulties, behaviour and mental health in ‘Literacy and Mental Health (updated 2018)’ and ‘Literacy and Behaviour (updated 2018)’. (4)

Speech pathologist and psychologist Professor Pamela Snow says, “Many young people with language and learning difficulties struggle enormously with the transition to secondary school and develop mental health problems such as anxiety and depression as a result”. (5) Professor Snow’s 2018 ‘*Open Letter to Student Teachers*’ describes how the prevailing reading instruction in our schools is failing our children. “We create way too many instructional casualties – children who do not have an intrinsic learning disability, but can end up appearing this way, as a result of inadequate or misguided early instruction. It’s not easy to catch these kids up – much better to teach them properly the first-time round and avoid the added complication of behavioural and emotional difficulties that often accompany reading problems.” (6) See ‘The Snow Report’ for evidence-based explanations on literacy and its bearing on vulnerability in early life and mental health problems (6).

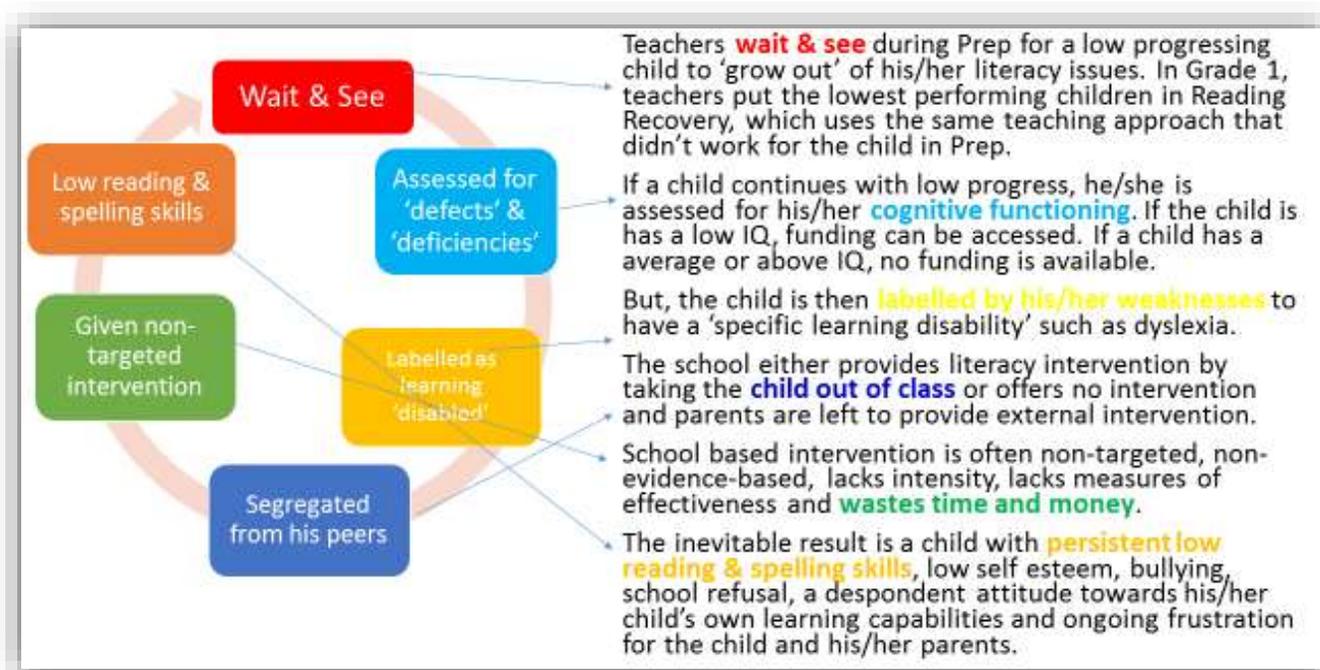
“To prevent mental illness among children with reading difficulties, we must first address the cause of reading failure in our education system.”

Dyslexia Victoria Support

The prevailing yet disproven ‘*Wait and See*’ model (illustrated below) perpetuates reading failure (7) by ignoring the children who enter school with a predisposition to reading difficulties. It is well-recognised in reading research that children with a core phonological deficit will require explicit and systematic training in phonemic awareness and phonics. (8) Yet, early screening and early intervention for reading difficulties are inadequate in our Victorian education system. Local research shows Reading Recovery is the most commonly used reading intervention program in Victorian Schools (9) despite its lack of efficacy for children with reading difficulties. (10) We urge you to listen to ‘*Hard to Read, How American schools fail kids with dyslexia*’ by Emily Hanford, which provides a candid insight into how and why our children are not learning to read at school—although it is based in the USA, it is applicable to our Victorian education system. (11)



The Wait and See model (or The Wait to Fail)



2. What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poor mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

It is well-known that Australia has a problem when it comes to reading and spelling (12) and as outlined above, children with reading difficulties are at risk of poor mental health. Statewide reform in all Victorian schools is the only equitable way forward to ensure all children learn to read in school in their early years.

DVS suggests the following initiatives to address the failings of our education system and the subsequent mental health issues -

- Provide teacher training in 'Effective Reading Instruction' in line with current scientific evidence to all school principals and early years teachers (13) by mandating the 'Learning difficulties including dyslexia workshops and webinars' (14)
- Screen all children early to identify reading difficulties by updating the English Online Interview in line with current scientific evidence (15)
- Fund decodable books for all foundation (prep) children (16)



- Employ speech pathologists in schools to guide best practice in reading instruction (5) and psychologists with training in reading difficulties
- Implement the Year 1 Phonics Check (17)
- Implement student reading outcome measures in line with current scientific evidence in schools (rather than the current disproven 'running records') (18)

3. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

We would appreciate all commissioners read the lived experiences of DVS parents. We remind you that these experiences are replicated all over Victoria. This is not a new problem...our education system has failed decades' worth of precious children. It is time for change.

"Extreme anxiety about maths homework last night and our first complete meltdown for the year. Lots of push back about having to seek help, which of course is the basis of everything we do. Now starting to wonder about dyscalculia on top of everything else. Negotiated a morning off as he had such little sleep. Back from school drop off for my youngest and he's already saying he can't cope with going at all today. Now I'm anxious (awesome, hey!) with that crushing feeling in your chest and with more work on that I can cope with. Times like this I'm SO glad I work at home and can juggle everything around Dyslexia. Because that's what it feels like some days. Shout out to everyone else who had a morning like mine. 😊🙌"

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Hughesdale, Victoria

"Feeling incredibly emotional after having a professional finally acknowledge my daughter has a learning difference which has caused her anxiety, not anxiety which has caused her to be behind with her schooling!"

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Werribee, Victoria

"It's been a long and painful journey for my family, discovering that my now 10 year old son has a specific leaning difficulty (dyslexia and dysgraphia). I'm a speech pathologist, writer and avid book reader and books and literacy are highly valued in my family and our house. My son always loved books and being read to, but during his kinder and early school years it was apparent to me that he was not picking up written language in the way we would have expected given his strong oral language skills.

Getting him to try to read at home was a battle and we fought with him every night to try to help him. His teachers did not share my concern in his first years of schooling, thinking that he lacked confidence and that made it very isolating for us. I doubted my concerns and my ability to help my son.

My husband and I didn't know how to help him and this was a very difficult time for us and impacted on not only my son's wellbeing but our whole family's.



I read some research recently which suggests that children very early on in their schooling form a self-concept of themselves as learners, and this was certainly the case with my son. Because reading and writing are so crucial to learning and showing what we've learnt, my son quickly formed the view that he was 'dumb' and this has persisted across his primary school years despite our best efforts to describe the difficulties he has and put them in context of his different way of learning.

He is now in grade four and often still refers to the fact that he believes he is 'the dumbest kid in his class'. Since learning about my son's difficulties, I have spent many hours and considerable expense to educate myself about how to help him. Advocating for adjustments and extra assistance at school is difficult, time consuming and mentally exhausting and often met with lack of understanding and resistance from the school.

Our school, like many others, has little knowledge of dyslexia and our literacy coordinator often expresses her doubt about whether dyslexia is actually a 'thing'. In grade 2 she noticed that there was something unusual about his spelling, she suggested seeing a behavioral optometrist.

I later learnt this is not an evidence-based treatment for dyslexia, but by this stage we had spent a lot of money, time and frustration doing the 'vision therapy' with the behavioural optometrist. My son hated it and it was yet another battle to be fought with him. This eroded my trust in the school and their knowledge and put me off accessing further help for another 6-12 months.

Now I spend a lot of time trying to educate and explain the impact my son's difficulties have on his self esteem, wellbeing and mental health. I have to do so in a polite and pragmatic way, but even so I often feel like that difficult parent, who always wants something and is always hassling them to do something else.

It's a lot of work for little change. And all the while the precious days where my son could be learning and catching up to his peers are disappearing, and the time where he can really learn in the way that works for him has to wait until he's at home, when he's tired after a full day at school of trying his guts out, when he should be able to rest and play and do the things he enjoys. Instead, he gets to sit down with me for some more work.

His teachers do not yet have the knowledge to teach him in an effective way, and so it comes down to me to do extra work with him at home.

I feel a lot of stress and burden and often that I am not doing enough to help him. I worry about what the future will hold for him as he transitions to high school and how he will cope. I worry for the impact when he wants to get a job. I have sought counselling for anxiety related to these issues. It has a direct impact on my mental health. I work reduced days at work so that I can manage the additional mental load and work I do to help my son.

I recently did a four day course at a cost of \$1000 so that I can tutor my son at home myself rather than hire a tutor. This is difficult and exhausting work both for my son and myself.



If my son's difficulties had been picked up in his early schooling using best practice evidence based assessment and intervention, and the school had been able to provide relevant and helpful support, we could have avoided a lot of pain and distress and minimised the impact on my son's and my family's mental health.

It's heartbreaking to look around at school and talk to other parents who are having similar struggles. There are lots of us. I think perhaps the thing that frustrates me the most is that we know how to help these kids. We know about the science of reading and what we should be teaching our teachers in their University courses. We have many knowledgeable professionals who can work in partnerships with schools and a few schools who are taking on board the evidence to see impressive outcomes. We need better collaboration between schools and reading experts. We need schools and teachers with growth mindsets, commitment to evidence based practices and continuous practice improvements. Our governments can guide our schools as to how literacy is best taught for all children.

All of this would be preventative and minimising of mental health issues that so commonly and understandably stem from learning difficulties."

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, West Footscray, Victoria

"My son first believed he was dumb at age 5 in prep at school. Prior to that time he had been an extremely happy satisfied, curious and creative child. He has 2 older siblings and a twin.

As soon as the class began to learn reading, he experienced total frustration and had great difficulty learning to read (the school was using the balanced literacy approach, which I now know will not teach dyslexic children to read).

As my son looked around at the other children reading, including his twin, the only explanation he could find was that he must be stupid and dumb. That belief stayed with him all through his schooling and probably in some ways persists even today in adulthood. Despite incredible family support, and us paying vast sums of money on additional tutoring and psychological counselling, despite us discovering that he had learning difficulties in maths and literacy, that self belief took hold so early and so strongly that it has been impossible to fully shake.

In the early years at primary school, my son became a quiet, meek, unconfident child who hid from the limelight, would suffer anxiety and at times complain of tummy aches and not want to go to school. A particular teacher who took a great interest in him managed to coax him out of his shell over the 2 years that she taught him. He still had great difficulty reading (and still does) but she saw his strengths where others hadn't and that probably saved him from a worse fate.

There were of course others who came later who accused him of not trying hard enough (such a terrible thing when you are actually trying your very hardest) In secondary school he developed migraines and cyclical



vomiting and one of the triggers was stress which was related to his learning difficulties – dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. He attended psychology sessions throughout school.

Unfortunately he is not alone. The cost to society and the loss of potential is heartbreaking. It is so unnecessary as the science of how to teach reading is clear. So many children could avoid this heartache just by changing the way literacy is taught. This would free up mental health resources and change children's lives.

I hope with all my heart that you read all these submissions and make vital recommendations to save the next generation of children from this unnecessary pain."

DVS member, parent of child with dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia, Vice Chair Code Read Dyslexia Network Australia, Fairfield, Victoria

"I am a mother of a 8 year old that struggles with anxiety related to having a learning difficulty. Because our schools are not trained to identify and support kids with dyslexia their difficulties go unnoticed and kids end up suffering in silence. Once we got to grade 1 my daughter started to notice that she was struggling with reading and would come home to tell us "I am the worst reader in the class" at the same time she started to refuse to go to school. Saying this uniform doesn't make me look smart. Having un-diagnosed dyslexia has really impacted her self esteem. We were also alarmed to learn at the June parent teacher interviews that she had been refusing to do writing activities in class. In grade prep she was obsessed with writing and erasing her work all the time. All because she was anxious that she was getting it wrong. What we now know is that she was extremely anxious about her work and quite literally frightened at school. This has started to have negative impacts on her behaviour. She gets completely overwhelmed and has ended in her running off on her teachers to hide or often refusing to go to school multiple times a week. Because of her outbursts other kids have started to pick on her and wind her up to try and get a reaction from her. Calling her crazy and picking on her.

Yet we get almost no support except 10 sessions with a psychologist through Medicare, which we will run out of by the middle of the year. But this is the tip of the iceberg of for what she needs to thrive and be able to manage her anxiety around her differences.

With an estimated 1 in 5 kids why is there no strategy in our school system to support kids who need to learn in a different way. Schools teach to the mid range and the kids who struggle just get further and further behind. What this means over time are these kids either act out and avoid schools or they do everything they can to hide their failings. Slink into the background and go un noticed. But we know that there are ways to better support our kids to get the groundings they need. We need the schools to catch up and some are. But it has to happen faster. My daughter can't get back the years of education she has nearly lost and the result is kids get to high school and the issues only get worse and worse. But if we dedicate to proper interventions that are targets and research supported to assist kids with dyslexia then the intervention work will reduce the impacts on our kids anxiety and self esteem issues.



I beg the royal commission to take our kids seriously and investigate the impact on lack of programs to support our kids and what impact this has on their mental health now and as they grow up and become adults."

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Coburg, Victoria

"Our now 10 year old son is suffering severe anxiety due to his learning difficulties and the lack of understanding and help that he's received from the two schools he has attended is actually pathetic and disheartening. Teacher's need to be taught at teaching college about how to teach children to read with evidence based methods. He hates school because they don't get him (his words) so he has loads of school refusal. This plays such a major part of his anxiety and it affects our family life as a whole severely. And the astronomical financial stress that we incur to get our son extra external educational and mental health help out of school is an added stress. It is VERY difficult as parents to watch your child suffer without assistance and anxiety."

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Dingley Village, Victoria

"This is our son's story. He is now 15 and in year 10. Our son was a very energetic, smart, curious, active young boy. His issues of sitting still became very apparent when he started prep at a private school. The teacher would tell me everyday he just wouldn't sit still in class. He didn't seem to want to learn. Everyday was a struggle for her and him. At the time they were doing the golden words. He just didn't seem to grasp how to read. He was falling behind the other kids and started really not liking school. Towards the middle of the year we took him to a psychologist and he told her he wanted to die in a fire. That's how miserable he was. He was 6 years old. The psychologist said this was anxiety. The school did some testing and said he was very smart but seemed to have behavioural issues. At the time no learning difficulties were noticed. We took him to a paediatrician and he was diagnosed with ADHD and medication was suggested. In grade 1 we moved him to a different private school hoping for better help. After trialling many different types of ADHD medications with awful side effects we found one that seemed to keep him quiet in the classroom with fewer side effects. The teacher was very happy with him on medication as he wasn't disruptive and seemed to be working. He learnt to read and write but always with difficulty. The teacher never mentioned any issues with reading and writing, but he was always reluctant to pick up a book and read.

I noticed that as the years went on he still was not achieving what he should have been with the high IQ that he had. Homework was always a struggle. Whenever we took him off the medication because he had no appetite and found it hard to sleep, the school would complain he wasn't coping in class and was disruptive. We felt that whilst he was on the medication his personality was different. He was very quiet and subdued, became angry easily and suffered more anxiety. After 6 years on medication we decided it was enough and took him off. We are still so uncomfortable with the fact that we medicated our child because of pressure from the school. He was now in year 7.



As he went through year 7, 8 and 9, the school put a lot of pressure on him. They complained he wasn't doing his homework and wasn't participating in class. I kept asking if he could have dyslexia and they kept saying no but he can read. It still baffles me how little the school educational psychologist seemed to understand about dyslexia. This year our son is in year 10 and it has been a disaster. It is a major struggle to get him to go to school and he has stopped doing any homework. We decided to get him tested outside of the school for dyslexia.

The tests came back with high IQ with mild dyslexia. His phonological decoding and word reading abilities both fell below expectations. They think that he managed to mask his difficulties with compensatory strategies. The damage of having undiagnosed learning difficulties on his mental health was huge. His self-esteem was constantly knocked and he always felt like something was wrong with him. The problem for us now is that it is almost too late for this diagnosis. He hates school and refuses to learn. He is depressed and has developed a fear of trying anything to do with learning. We are desperately trying to keep him at school at the moment. Looking back, if it was picked up that he had learning difficulties from a young age, things could have been different.

I think there is a real lack of understanding in schools about learning difficulties. The diagnosis of ADHD is given out way too easily and doctors are quick to medicate. Our son never wanted to be naughty. He didn't make a moral choice not to learn. He just wasn't given the help he needed to learn.

After being at a private school for 11 years and hoping that he was getting the best help they could give he fell through the cracks. No one cared he was struggling, it has always been all about the marks."

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Malvern, Victoria

"My daughter first exhibited signs of mild anxiety in her first year of school where she was taught reading using whole language principles. These centered around her not wanting to read to any other parent helpers in the morning. In grade 1, she noticed that her reading ability was significantly less than many of the children in the year below her in the composite class. Her anxiety escalated and the school insisted on a behaviour plan to manage the anxiety. They insisted she was not having reading difficulties. That same year the teacher at midyear parent teacher interviews told me my child was lazy and often distracted and had not produced enough writing samples for the teacher to conduct an assessment. I suggested that there might be a reason she was struggling with writing and the teacher dismissed my suggestions. I watched my little girl's self-esteem evaporate and her mental health decline as she concluded that she was dumb. She begged me to remove her from school she did not feel safe or understood at school. I told my child we had to trust that the teacher knew how to help. I now know that the teacher thought she knew how to help but actually had no idea how to help. I spent a weekend in bed due to stress as I struggled to find a solution. When I asked for information about learning difficulties, the teacher dismissed my concerns. After convincing the school to arrange a phonic awareness screening test, which showed she had a problem, just 1 percentile above the level needed to qualify for intervention at school we arranged for private psychological testing. Following diagnosis, we sought



intervention privately and my child was taught using systematic synthetic phonics and rapidly became an accomplished reader. At one point during grade 1 I arranged for my daughter's psychologist to meet with the teacher to provide advice but the psych was turned away because the teacher was "under pressure". We have a number of times sought mental health care plans for my daughter so she could see a psych but found little benefit from talk therapy while issues at school with lack of support were ongoing plus we struggled to find a psychologist who understood the issues. My little girl is now in grade 5 with ongoing difficulties in writing, she has very fragile self esteem and has this year talked about suicide seeking us to once again seek mental health care. She is unable to identify her gifts and talents without assistance. Last week I asked her to tell me what she was good at and she said I'm not good at anything because I have dyslexia and autism. I wish someone at the school understood the harm that has been caused due to the school's failure to identify her as a student at risk of reading failure and to provide appropriate instruction from her first day at school. I believe she would not now be suffering with ongoing mental health issues had they identified her needs and implemented an appropriate intervention. I have been placed in a situation where I have had to educate teachers about severe anxiety and reading difficulties and have had to provide them with suggestions for supporting my child. Sometimes teachers have felt that I was imposing on their area of professional expertise and have refused to include me as part of the team. It has impacted our whole family including my own mental health. We continue to pay for private tutoring once a week, which costs \$100, and fortnightly psych appointments, which cost \$220 before the Medicare rebate. Most nights my child cries with despair that she cannot keep up at school."

DVS member, mother to one child with dyslexia and autism, Altona, Victoria

"Our daughter has always been a sensitive, caring, empathetic child, she comes from a house of books and art and pets. My daughter loved Prep, she loved learning. She has always been an optimistic child, filled with laughter and a wicked sense of humour. However, by grade 2, everything began to unravel for this happy go lucky kid. In grade 1 she started to notice that she wasn't like the other kids in her class, her reading and her maths failed to progress.

She noticed that she was placed in a group of kids that needed more attention. Her name was on the table of kids who struggled. She raised with her teacher the issue of her name being spelt incorrectly on the board for her table arrangement. When she attempted to corrected the teacher, she was told she was wrong. My daughter knew how to spell her own name however her teacher refused to change it! It remained that way for 6 months, despite repeated attempts by her and eventually me to change it. I brushed it off as a lack of attention to detail by her classroom teacher, but my daughter began to notice this was a pattern.

It was the little things that started mounting up, the fact that she couldn't read like the other kids (we started getting a Systematic Synthetic Phonics tutor for her literacy difficulties, eventually, she was diagnosed with both Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) and Dyscalculia), around that time she had a very quick growth spurt, and she needed glasses. The common catcalls in the playground started, my daughter was now referred to by some kids as: "tall, dumb and weird". The bullying began to escalate and after many attempts to get



teachers to monitor the playground, without fail, my daughter started to write a list of the children who were bullying her and eventually, one night, gave it to me. My daughter was now in grade 2, and with my parent advocacy work, I had just been in Sydney attending a Learning Difficulties Convention. After speaking to colleagues I began to develop and understand the strong connection between learning difficulties, anxiety, school refusal, self-abuse and mental health issues.

Armed with this new knowledge, I quickly made an appointment with the Principal, along with all my agenda items. These included: what was going on in the playground, what was the school approach to bullying, where was the bully policy and what can I do to stop the bullying in the playground, what evidence-based support could I get for my child with literacy difficulties?

At the meeting we took minutes and we agreed to meet again to see how things were going. I falsely believed that this bullying would be nipped in the bud and things would be ok, how wrong I was!

During the course of term 3, I made repeated attempts to get access to a school psychologist, our daughter's anxiety was beginning to turn into a mental health issue and yet, nothing happened, no acknowledgement, no support.

As you can imagine I was confused. I believed that as a mental health issue, my daughter would receive support. I knew that there was a school psychologist who visited periodically, I knew this because many parents did get help. I sought further advice from my friends, my family and my professional colleagues.

I started to gather evidence, of repeated bullying issues at school, difficulties with the lack of appropriate literacy and numeracy support in the classroom for a child with learning difficulties, I had discussions with other parents at the school. We wanted help for our child and we wanted it now! When I began to raise these issues with her classroom teacher, I observed that my daughter's teacher was also struggling, with the weight of the class, I began to ask "what support she as a professional, was getting and how she could help our daughter"? She didn't know how to help, and all previous suggestions for school literacy PD all fell on deaf ears. We began to panic, what do we do and where do we go to get help?

The Principal outlined that she was not interested in seeing the bully list that my daughter had written, that the school had a bully policy (although it was not publicly available on the school website, and was completely out of date) and the normal course of action for all Playground issues was for the Grade 6 Mentors (11 year olds!) to deal with these issues. This came as a shock to us, we acknowledged that as this was a mental health issue for our daughter, nothing was being done by the school to curb the extensive, historical behaviour of bullying at the school. Soon we discovered that this bullying was common across all grades and was not being stopped despite requests from many, many parents. We began to realise, that despite attending a State feeder school for many local private schools, this was not the school for us. As Parents, we were distraught, confused, our



happy little girl started to relive at home, the bullying that was happening in the playground every day, we just couldn't cope.

We had a smart, artistic child, bullied at her school, diagnosed with learning difficulties, suffering from mental health issues, and needed support. But, not once did she ever refused to go to school, she knew that she needed to go to school to learn.

By midway through grade 2, I asked my daughter, "what can we do to help make this right?" Her answer was, "let's leave the school Mum, nothing is going to get any better", she was 8, I cried and I cried, I hugged my child. I knew what this meant, it meant separating myself from my school support network, it would force my child into a situation, while suffering from mental health issues, not addressed by our school would potentially be carried into our next school, I was fearful that we wouldn't get assistance and that no one at our new school would understand how my child was feeling.

How could this child, who tried so hard at school, so hard to make friends, make that decision? Why couldn't we get support from our publically funded State School? How could they let this happen to a child in grade 2, let alone across all grades, something was seriously wrong.

We began to look for other schools in the area, we couldn't afford to send her to a private school and we felt that it was important for her to finish grade 6 at a State school, we had the funds to spend to pay for a literacy tutor and eventually a Speech Pathologist, once a week.

We finally found a local school, outside our zone. where I outlined our difficulties to the Principal. I took in all the reports, our NAPLAN results and reports and printed emails I had with our old school as evidence, where we were asking for help.

I asked for help from the Principal for access to mental health support and within 10 minutes of our interview, it was, yes! Yes, she could have access to all the psychological support she needed, it was that easy, a simple yes. I will always be indebted to this Principal. She was our helping hand. I cried and cried and cried. I still cry today thinking that this was all it took, after 12 months of asking and pleading for the support my daughter needed, this could all be supported with 10 minutes.

My daughter saw a school psychologist every week in the beginning, and on and off for 4 years, from grade 2 to grade 6. She needed support for her ongoing trust issues, for her issues around forming relationships, for her issues of self-esteem, her struggles to find out who she was, not just, "tall, dumb and weird."

These are issues that still affect her, and we are blessed that our State School Principal recognised that a grade 2 child was so damaged by relentless bullying that could have been, identified, could have been stopped, and she could have received intensive support without having to uproot her social network and change schools



where she was required to make new friendships where she had already developed a sense of mistrust. We are indebted to the school psychologist, with her huge caseload.

My daughter is now in Year 7. We did enrol her into a private school where her learning difficulties are acknowledged, supported and accommodated. She receives Individual Needs assistance in the classroom. She is learning to find herself, to build ongoing relationships with her new peers, she still prefers the company of adults, who can understand her need for support and when to apply a "filter". Her needs remain complex, but during the course of her whole time at Primary School, not once did she say that she didn't want to go to school.

I implore you to read all the submission that lay before you today, listen to all the parents to present their stories to you, and help us. Help us make a difference for all children, not just those affected by learning difficulties, but those children and parents who stay silent despite being bullied and cannot stand up for themselves. I implore you to provide more support for children who need a helping hand, like our child, it just took one person to help, our School Principal. Yes, it's simple."

Founder of DVS, parent of two children with dyslexia, Richmond, Victoria

"Well what a day. 1st day back and my 10 yo daughter has a complete meltdown not wanting to go to school. She suffers from anxiety due to her learning ability. She also has other issues that that cause her anxiety to be so bad. I met with the teachers and well being person. A [redacted] was crying, I was crying. It's just so hard. What is the use of ILPs if she can't do the work. Can't read and can barely write. But we have an ILP for Italian so that's great. Why don't they understand how hard it is. So from what I can gather today is that I need to teach her to read. Already tonight asking me if she has to go tomorrow."

DVS member, parent of a child with dyslexia, Doreen, Victoria

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