

11 Questions for dyslexia friendly schools

Written by Sarah Mitchell of <https://inspirededucationservices.com.au/>

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Looking for learning difference/dyslexia friendly schools? Here are some **must ask** questions to help you pick the right dyslexia friendly school for your child.

Before attending your meeting, do a bit of background research. The more you know about dyslexia, teacher education programs and intervention programs, the more targeted you can be with your questions and the better you will understand the answers. There are some excellent Facebook support groups for parents of dyslexic children Australia wide. Many dyslexia professionals follow these groups, so you may want to post questions (or your findings) on these forums, too.

1. Are your classroom teachers trained in dyslexia and specific learning difficulties?

If the answer is yes, ask what kind of training they receive, how often and how the implementation is monitored. Ask the person conducting your tour to explain the schools' training over the past year and how subject leaders and senior leaders ensure class teachers provide for students with specific needs. Make sure they focus on dyslexia and specific learning difficulties, not just physical and intellectual disabilities.

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2. What is your understanding of dyslexia?

If the person conducting your tour is a senior leader or subject leader, they should be able to give you a reasonable explanation of what dyslexia is. If the person says something along the lines of 'We don't have many dyslexic students.', this could indicate a lack of understanding or awareness within the school.

3. Which reading program(s) does your school use to provide additional support to dyslexic students?

An ideal answer should include evidence-based reading programs that target phonemic awareness (awareness of sounds), phonics (relationships between sounds and letters), morphology (chunks of meaning within words – prefixes, bases and suffixes), vocabulary, and sentence structure. The program should have a clear structure, starting with single letter sounds, moving into basic phonic patterns and then onto more challenging ones. Ask the person conducting your tour to explain how their program works. If possible, ask them to show you the program and do some research after your meeting.

A **poor answer** might include:

- Reading recovery
- We use a whole language approach
- Guided reading
- We give the students extra practice at reading a variety of books
- Reading to children is usually enough for them to learn to read well
- Silent reading time

These methods do not provide the explicit teaching of how English orthography (spelling) works, and are not useful for students with dyslexia.

4. Does a teaching assistant or specialist teacher deliver intervention programs at this school?

Ideally, intervention programs should be delivered by a specialist teacher with training in dyslexia. However, this isn't always practical for most schools. If the program is to be delivered by a teaching assistant, ask what training the person has had. Many teaching assistants do great work with dyslexic kids but ask as many questions as you need until you're comfortable you understand their qualifications and experience. Be aware – experience is not the same as being educated about dyslexia! Focus on the training the person has undertaken.

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5. What training does the person(s) providing additional support have? Could you please tell me the name of the courses they have completed? Again research the programs after your meeting.

An ideal answer from a dyslexia friendly school will include training in:

- Multi-sensory teaching
 - Explicit teaching
 - Systematic, synthetic phonics teaching
 - Teaching metacognition strategies
 - Building confidence
 - Writing and reviewing IEPs including writing clear, achievable (SMART) targets
 - Visible learning (making goals 'visible' to the student through clear target setting, communication and review with the student)
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6. Does your school follow an inclusion model, or do you have a separate learning support unit?

There are arguments for both models, but what you want to find out is how the support unit operates if there is one.

Questions might include:

- How many students are enrolled at this school?
- How many students are listed as having special needs?
- How many support staff/specialist teachers work at this school?
- What is the expectation of support staff? What are their roles?
- Do class teachers implement the recommendations of the support staff in class?
- Do support staff work with the students within the classroom?
- Do students with specific needs get any one-to-one or small group support in take-out sessions?

The number of students and the number of those listed as having special needs (including dyslexia) is a good indicator of how well the school identifies students with additional needs. The number of support staff in comparison to student numbers is a good indication of how well these students are supported. Compare these numbers for each school you visit.

Having learning support work generally within the class can be a great way to keep open communication with class teachers. However, older children can find having someone sit with them embarrassing, and this model of support can cause 'learned helplessness'. This is where children become accustomed to waiting for someone else to repeat the instruction or do the task for them, causing them to become passive in their learning. Some children require one-to-one support which is best given in take-out sessions, but a separate unit can also lead class teachers to view supporting dyslexic students as being the responsibility of the support team. Ask as many questions as you need to until you're clear on how the school support system works.

7. How do you determine 'at risk' pupils in your school, and what referral process do you use for these students?

A good answer from a dyslexia friendly school should include the types of behaviours and difficulties class teachers look for within the classroom that might indicate a student has underlying difficulties. Do they use checklists or keep other records? Who do they report to when they have concerns a student might have learning difficulties? Does the school report to parents and / or refer parents to external professionals where concerns have been raised?

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8. How does the school determine who gets an individual education plan (IEP)?

Ask if having dyslexia is one of the reasons a student may receive an IEP.

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9. May I see an anonymised or mock example of your schools IEP document?

Look for SMART targets. These targets are; specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time-bound. Ask how often IEPs get reviewed, and who is involved in the review process. Ideally, the class teacher(s), specialist teacher and parents should be involved.

10. What assistive technology does your school utilise?

A good answer should list programs used to aid writing skills, either predictive text programs (they predict words as you're typing, a bit like your smartphone does) or speech to text, the use of laptops within all subjects, touch typing practice, and for primary students, may include the use of evidence-based reading programs, such as Nessy for extra reading skills practice.

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11. What kinds of exam access arrangements do you offer students with dyslexia?

Allowing students with specific learning difficulties extra time, rest breaks and laptops would all be reasonable adjustments to help them reach their potential in exams. Again, ask specifically about students with dyslexia. A poor response might be that allowing the use of laptops gives those students an 'unfair' advantage. Giving a dyslexic a laptop to use in exams is similar to giving a physically disabled child a wheelchair. It **is not** an unfair advantage, it levels the playing field.

To help you find the best Dyslexia Friendly School, I have created a free response template for you.

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An answer guide for meeting with schools is available free to download on Sarah's website:

<https://inspirededucationservices.lpages.co/dyslexia-friendly-school-response-template/>

Code Read Dyslexia Network Australia

Get in contact with us:
info@codereadnetwork.org
PO Box 493
CURTIN ACT 2605
Australia