

## Guest voice: Dad's send letter to daughter with dyslexia

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Dear Erica: Earlier this year, your mom and I learned that God gave you a special gift called dyslexia, meaning you are one of 20 percent of people who learn differently because you process language on the right side of the brain instead of the left side.

Don't worry; there is nothing wrong with your brain or your ability to learn. You just learn in a different way.

Most people with dyslexia have weak phonemic awareness, meaning they are unaware of the role sounds play in words. They must be taught by a systematic and explicit method that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, touching) at the same time. The whole language and balanced literacy methods taught in most schools are not systematic or structured enough. With these methods, students with dyslexia often fall behind because they are not taught the strategies they need to deconstruct (decode) and construct (encode) new words.

Around the third grade, students with dyslexia typically start to fail as the number of words they need to memorize exceeds their capacity to retain them. This typically starts the heartbreaking cycle of pain that may endure for a lifetime. Since no one can figure out why they can't read, they run the risk of being made fun of and labeled stupid or lazy. Some students will drop out of school and society.

It took us almost four years to finally uncover what was happening and why you had trouble reading, writing, spelling and memorizing words.

Erica, you are among the lucky ones. By chance we met another family whose child went through a similar experience. Things changed when they met a caring private school principal who is trained to accurately test for dyslexia, finally putting all of the puzzling pieces together.

You are now being taught to read by a tutor at a private school that embraces an Orton-Gillingham-based system, one of the certified teaching methods appropriate for students with dyslexia (and even those who do not have dyslexia).

It is disturbing that up to 20 percent of your classmates in Erie County and the rest of the United States will not be fortunate enough to be diagnosed or be able to afford the type of teaching they need to succeed.

There are proven evidence-based programs that can be used to test for and treat dyslexia. It is unfortunate that many reading teachers, psychologists, special education administrators and principals have not received adequate training in dyslexia and its classic warning signs -- even though it is the most common reason a bright student will struggle first with spelling, then written expression, and will eventually "hit the wall" in reading development by third grade.

It is critical to the future of our children that the correct teaching methods are made available to all students within the school setting so they don't slip through the cracks.





My goal is to inspire other concerned parents, educators and business leaders to work together with forward-thinking legislators to implement legislation that will provide for a better investment of current school tax and parent dollars by enabling appropriate early screening and remediation for children with dyslexia.

There is a solid connection between quality early childhood experiences and a strong Pennsylvania economy. By changing the way we teach children the language code, this will help better prepare people for the working world, while fostering the confidence to become better adults and reach their full potential.

Many famous artists, musicians and actors have dyslexia, including Robert Branson, Charles Schwab and Henry Winkler. It's estimated that 35 percent of entrepreneurs have dyslexia.

They beat the odds by overcoming the hurdles posed by our current educational system. We need more people who think differently to help solve our business, economic and social problems to help keep moving America forward. Diversity is what truly makes our country great!

Erica, you too can turn your dyslexia into a gift. I hope this letter gives you the confidence and inspiration you need to live up to and achieve your full potential. Love, Dad

MICHAEL A. PLAZONY is senior vice president of the Life Division for Erie Insurance. He serves on the board of directors for the Sarah A. Reed Children's Center and is a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. His daughter currently attends Leadership Christian Academy in Fairview Township.