

Project Eye-To-Eye Commission Report

—Empowering Students with Learning Disabilities through the Power of Mentorship

In the U.S. alone, more than 2.7 million students are identified with a learning disability (LD), and over 2.4 million children are labeled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Without appropriate guidance and support, many of these children will be at significant risk of poor emotional adjustment, academic failure, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and even greater risk for depression and suicide. In recent years, the number of enrolled students with documented disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, has continued to increase. While 54 percent of students with learning disabilities aspire to go to college, only one in three are enrolled in any postsecondary school within two years of leaving high school, and less than 10 percent attend a four-year college or university. More alarming, very few parents of students with learning disabilities believe their child will graduate from a two-year college (14 percent) or university (10 percent).

Since 1997, Project Eye-To-Eye, a 501(c)(3) organization, has been helping and empowering one of the most at-risk populations in the United States--youth diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Project Eye-To-Eye is the only mentoring program in the country that does its work by pairing young people struggling with their learning disability with successful mentors with learning disabilities who understand their challenges, fears and dreams. Today, Project Eye-To-Eye helps over 15,000 people a year with its mentoring programs for children with LD/ADHD, its youth leadership development programs for high school and college students with LD/ADHD, through public lectures on learning differences led by Project Eye-To-Eye Co-Founders, Jonathan Mooney and David Flink and through parent and community outreach programs.

Project Eye-To-Eye's research-based program model is designed to build life skills for independence and improve self-esteem through the power of role modeling. Beyond the important work of building self-esteem, Project Eye-To-Eye also gives children with LD/ADHD the concrete skills necessary for independent living and academic success. Project Eye-To-Eye mentoring chapters are staffed entirely by volunteer college or high school students who have a learning disability. There is no cost associated with participation and each chapter is tailored to the needs and resources of the local school and high school/university sponsor. Mentors are connected to their mentee for at least one to two years and meet weekly. Project Eye-To-Eye's art-based curriculum builds self-esteem by allowing students to access their individual gifts and talents, explore their learning difference in a safe space, and develop learning strategies and identify accommodations that are based on strengths not weaknesses. Mentors also work with families and teachers to support learning strategies and academic accommodations based on strengths not weaknesses.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, postsecondary institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodations in the form of auxiliary aids and services for students with disabilities." Auxiliary aids and services are those that ensure "effective communication" and include accessible electronic and informational technology. The Department of Justice and the Office of Civil Rights, which enforce compliance of Section 504 and the ADA, have consistently ruled that assistive technology is necessary in providing equal access to educational opportunities and equally effective instructional materials. Without access to alternative print/assistive technology students with print-related disabilities face a substantial barrier that has a negative impact on their academic and future achievement. The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) considers three basic components of effectiveness as timeliness of delivery, accuracy of translation, and provision of material in a manner and medium appropriate to the significance of the message and the abilities of the individual with a disability. OCR also recognizes that providing reading material in a "timely, accurate,

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complete, and appropriate alternative format for students with print impairments is one of the greatest challenges facing colleges and universities today.”¹.

For the majority of postsecondary colleges and universities the demand for accessible instructional materials far exceeds the capacity of the institution. The Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) recognizes that the majority of postsecondary institutions have “developed in-house conversion capabilities because, in many cases, if not most, no reasonable alternative exists. As a result, disability service providers have had to become experts in information technology in the classroom, assistive technology for students with a wide-range of print-related and other assistive technology needs. The sheer volume and complexity of required reading at the postsecondary level, along with the ever-increasing utilization of information technology (Blackboard/Moodle sites) into classroom pedagogy, create significant challenges and negatively impacts a college or university’s capacity to responsibly comply with their legal obligations. AHEAD cautions against providing “access only through provision of linear audiotape, readers, or scanning stations”—a common accommodation approach used by postsecondary institutions for students needing alternative print formats. At the same time, there is recognition that “not all titles are available from the recognized authorized entities, and not all publishers are currently able and/or willing to provide many of the files necessary for student use, even in states with E-text Textbook laws.”²

Without access to alternative print/assistive technology students with print-related disabilities face a substantial barrier that has a negative impact on their academic and future achievement. It is imperative for all postsecondary institutions to support technologically sustainable practices for all students requiring accessible instructional materials. Postsecondary institutions cannot, however, be the sole body responsible for creating accessible instructional materials. To that end, Project Eye-To-Eye asks for:

- All publishers to make readily available for access or purchase alternative print formats in a truly accessible and flexible format (DAISY).
- Publishers to bound by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008.
- Adoption of DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) format, a digital format that facilitates the inclusion of synchronized audio, text and graphics in one digital production.
- Postsecondary disability service providers to be covered by the fair use and Chaffee Amendment provisions of the U.S. copyright law.
- Assistive technology to be more fully included into a student’s accommodation or transition plan.
- More opportunities for students to be exposed to assistive technology earlier in the educational career that will support their individual learning style and needs.
- K-12 and postsecondary institutions to universally support the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, into postsecondary pedagogy.³
- K-12 and postsecondary faculty to receive professional development on the use of accessible instructional materials and training on assistive technology in the classroom.
- All educational institutions to move away from viewing accessible instructional materials and assistive technology as a disability accommodation required by law, and view it more as a means of creating a truly accessible and inclusive environment for *all* learners.

¹ City College of San Francisco, OCR Case Docket No. 09-97=2145 (January 9, 1998).

² <http://www.ahead.org/resources/e-text/position-statement>

³ <http://www.udlcenter.org/>