Briefing Document for the meeting between the Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh and the Dyslexia Association of Ireland (Dec. 4th, 2019)

480,000 people in Ireland have dyslexia (1 in 10).

On average, 3 children in every classroom have dyslexia.

Background - Dyslexia in Ireland
Dyslexia is a Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD) which is very common – it is estimated that 1 in 10 people in Ireland have dyslexia. Dyslexia is life long and often runs in families. Dyslexia affects the acquisition of fluent and accurate reading and spelling skills often linked with underlying phonological processing difficulties. However, it can also affect reading comprehension, written expression, memory, organisational skills and maths. Individuals with Dyslexia can also have co-occurring conditions such as Dyspraxia/DCD and Dyscalculia. Early identification of dyslexia and appropriate intervention is key not only to supporting an individual academically but also pays a crucial role in relation to mental health and self-esteem.

Founded in 1972, the Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) works with and for people affected by dyslexia, by providing information, offering appropriate support services, engaging in advocacy and raising awareness of dyslexia. The DAI offer the following services to the public: information service, dyslexia assessment service, training courses for teachers and parents, self-esteem courses for young people, weekly afterschool workshops in 29 locations nationwide, dyslexia awareness training, lobbying and advocacy.

In late September 2019, the DAI carried out a large survey amongst its members and the wider dyslexia community in order to get the most up-to-date views and opinions of people with dyslexia and those who support them in Ireland. The survey had 438 respondents from a combination of parents, teachers and people with dyslexia.

Right to Identification of Dyslexia and Mental Health Impact
The DAI refutes the idea that ‘labelling’ a child with dyslexia is a negative action. These people have often already been labelled ‘slow’, ‘stupid’ and ‘lazy’ and having their dyslexia identified helps quash these incorrect ideas. Assessment helps to outline their learning needs, their strengths and weaknesses and is in fact a positive ‘relabelling’ which can be transformative of their own and others perception of their abilities and needs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) notes the right to identity and to ‘find your tribe’. Children and adults with dyslexia are often denied this right
by never having their dyslexia identified. 99% of respondents to the DAI survey reported that dyslexia assessment is a very important aid in understanding their Dyslexia and was positive for their mental health. The lack of any State provision for adult dyslexia assessment means that adults who were missed within primary and secondary education are forced to cover the financial and emotional cost of private assessment.

The emotions associated with dyslexia can be shame, embarrassment, low expectation and frustration. We know that children and adults within our education system still feel these emotions acutely. DAI runs self-esteem workshops for young people aged 9-16 years old where they tell us about their experiences and feelings of isolation in school. However, we know that it is not just young people that we interact with that have to deal with the consequences of dyslexia. Often the family and supporters of people with dyslexia shoulder the emotional and financial implications of dyslexia with little support from the State. Only 5% of people are satisfied with the level of support being provided by the government when it comes to assisting families or individuals dealing with dyslexia. Our members feel that their children are receiving the bare minimum support in school – if any.

**Teacher Training on Dyslexia**

Continual professional development (CPD) for teachers in relation to dyslexia is critical. At the moment, teacher training is not adequate or fit for purpose in the modern education system in relation to teaching students with dyslexia or other neuro-diverse conditions. DAI is calling for a mandatory module on neuro-diversity for all teachers, including universal design, identification of dyslexia, and best practices in classroom support. Currently, there is no consistency between teacher training colleges on the standard of training on dyslexia. Often dyslexia and other forms of neurodiversity are included in a module that is optional. As a result, students and parents can have no assurance in the standard of dyslexia knowledge that each teacher will have. According to our survey, 77% of parents feel that schools do not have enough supports in place to help students with dyslexia. The quality of support available in schools also varies massively from school to school. Survey respondents commented on ‘haphazard approaches’ to learning support with no clear way to measure effectiveness. It is important to note that 92% of survey respondents want mandatory training for teachers and this includes teachers who recognise that their knowledge of dyslexia may not be up-to-date and sufficient to support the 1 in 10 dyslexic children in their classroom.

In addition, DAI contends that if our education system is to move towards true inclusivity, teachers can and should be trained to formally identify dyslexia, moving further away from the medical model and recognising that teachers who work with children on a daily basis are best placed to identify their needs and learning profiles. Educational Psychologists should only be needed for complex cases and are not necessary for assessment/identification of the majority of clear-cut cases. This would move us away from the inequitable medical model and build capacity within the system and the teaching profession. The development of a dyslexia specialist teacher role, either within schools or shared between schools – for advice on complex cases, and capacity building for inclusion, would bring expertise and equality of access to all students.
Examinations and Assistive Technology

In our survey 89% of respondents called for extra time to be available for State exams. Extra time is a standard reasonable accommodation in Further Education and Higher Education in Ireland, and in second level exams in many other countries. Students with dyslexia and their parents have expressed frustration and shock when they are informed that no extra time accommodation is available to them for the Junior or Leaving Certificate give the often heavy reading and writing aspect of most papers. The introduction of extra time in State exams would allow secondary school examinations to come into line with what is available in FE and HE, and in line with international norms.

Finally, the theme of greater access to assistive technology both in-class and for State exams emerged from our survey. Often students with dyslexia find access to assistive technology life changing – allowing them to access the curriculum and express themselves in ways that they never thought possible. Widening access to assistive technology, including strongly encouraging ‘use your own device’ schemes for both in-class work and State exams would allow dyslexic students to reach their full potential. 81% of respondents called for funding for assistive technology as bearing the full cost of this life altering technology is burdensome for most families.

Conclusion

We thank Minister McHugh and his officials for meeting with us today and welcome progress that has been happening within the Department in the area of SEN in recent years.

Below is a synopsis of what the Dyslexia Association of Ireland are calling for to meet the needs of people with dyslexia within our education system. We look forward to working with the Minister, the Department of Education and Skills and its agencies, today and into the future, to explore all of the options below:

- The right of young people to have access to formal dyslexia identification to be vindicated thus satisfying this right to identity under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
- State services to provide adult dyslexia assessment
- Mandatory training for teachers on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses. Compulsory module on SEN and Neurodiversity on all teacher training courses to be included in Teaching Council criteria for ITE courses
- Mandatory in-service training (CPD) for existing teachers. Commitment for regular CPD on inclusion and neurodiversity, for individual teachers and at whole school level. DAI would welcome the opportunity to collaborate on teacher training initiatives
- Development of a Dyslexia specialist teacher role, either within schools or shared between schools
- Continuity and consistency of evidence based supports in schools – your level of support should not depend on where your school is
• A national dyslexia awareness programme is needed, to help quash myths and alleviate the negative mental health impact
• Extra time in State exams to become a standard reasonable accommodation for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties
• Widening of access to assistive technology for students with Dyslexia both for in-class work and State examinations.