

College for Students with Learning Disabilities

A School Counselor's Guide to Fostering Success

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WHY THIS BOOK?

In the winter of 1998, I was 7 months pregnant with my twin daughters. At the time, two of my three other children were already in full-time school and my youngest was a toddler. My two oldest children had both learned to read very early and very easily. My toddler was sounding out letters and showing signs of early literacy. Books were everywhere in my house, and my children knew that if they had a question about something, they could find the answer by reading. The library was our second home, and my children, allowed to check out as many books as they could carry, liked to bring home as much of it as possible. Each night, after everyone had their baths and had put on pajamas, we snuggled together on the couch, my toddler on my lap and each older child on either side of me, while I read aloud whatever book we had chosen for the night. To this day, so many years later, they still remember so many of the books we read as we sat nestled together on those nights. I was so proud of them for learning so quickly and so pleased that we all shared the same passion for books. I was, of course, convinced that their passion, aptitude and skill for reading came directly from me. I was convinced that my own love for reading and books was so great that it was only natural that they should pick up on it. I was also convinced that my own skill as a teacher and a counselor was certainly the catalyst that propelled them toward being the shining star readers that they were becoming. I could not help but take full credit for it. After all, I was an educator. I was a school counselor, and I certainly understood children. I was also secretly convinced that children whose parents read to them regularly became avid readers. I may even have harbored some judgment against parents of children who struggled to learn to read, thinking that those parents were just not doing their jobs. I never thought for a moment that everything that I thought I knew

too much, they would shut down, but if I pushed too little, they were happy to stay where they were. I knew that they needed the resource room for the extra time and attention that they needed in order to learn, but I also knew that there would come a time when they would have to leave that safety and comfort in order to reach their full potential. As a counselor, I knew what the risks related to learning disabilities were: failure, dropping out, higher risk of drug and alcohol abuse and higher risk of incarceration, among so many other things. Already I could see worrisome signs. They were having trouble making friends, stomachaches were a normal part of our morning routine, and homework, especially from their general education classes, was a lurid, tear-filled and nightly event. For most students, homework is meant to solidify the learning that has occurred during the day. For my daughters and other students with learning disabilities, when learning does not necessarily happen during the day, homework can be a nightly reminder of their deficits. For these kids, homework, no matter how "easy" (a word I have learned to hate), becomes a nightmare. For us, it was a nightly battle and the core of regular shouting matches and tears in our home.

I learned quickly that if I wanted these girls to learn, I had to help them find a middle ground. I had to figure out when their frustration about something like homework was getting in their way of learning and when it was necessary to push them past that frustration in order to get to the next step. There was a "sweet spot" somewhere in there that I viewed as the middle ground, and it was my job as their mother to help them find it. That middle ground lived somewhere where they would continue to feel successful without complacency, where they would keep working hard without shutting down, where they would keep trying even though it was hard and where they would stay interested in school while still feeling smart and capable no matter how frequently their reading levels, grades, peers or even teachers made them feel otherwise. I made it my mission to learn as much as I could about dyslexia and learning disabilities in general so that I could help them achieve the potential I knew they had. Every day was a discussion of how to best compensate for their challenges. Every day was a practice in self-advocacy for themselves and patience toward those (including some teachers) who did not understand that their disabilities did not define their intelligence. While most students work hard and study in school, my daughters had the added job of constantly assessing their needs and finding ways to address them in order to succeed. By the end of third grade, they were proficient, if not advanced, readers. By the end of middle school, resource room was just a memory. By the middle of high school, both girls were in advanced-placement and honors classes and getting high grades. By junior year, both girls were admitted into the National Honor Society. They had proven to everyone that they could do it, but as easy as they made it look, it never was. They were smart and hardworking and diligent, but they had

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about teaching, learning and counseling was about to get completely turned upside down.

Cass and Sydnee were born a full nine weeks before their due date. When we held them, they were so skinny and tiny that all we felt were their little bones. Their prematurity required that they spend a full month in the neonatal intensive care unit, and, in the beginning, every day was touch and go. When they came home, still fragile and tiny, each one of them sported a Velcro strap around their little bellies, attached to electronic boxes that monitored their breathing. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the “plug-ins” (as Cass and Syd were affectionately nicknamed) soon began to grow stronger, and by the time they reached preschool, there was little physical difference between them and any other toddler. What there was, however, was what seemed to be a giant gap when it came to the preliteracy skills that are necessary for learning to read and write. No matter how much I read to them or what they did in school, they mostly could not make any sense of letters. It seemed that no matter what I did, the alphabet just seemed to be a bunch of squiggles to them. Some days, though, something would seem to click, and they would suddenly know the name or sound of a particular letter. On those days, I would breathe a sigh of relief and convince myself that, just like my other children had, they were learning to read. Invariably, though, the next day would come, and anything that they seemed to have learned the day before would be gone as if it had never happened at all. Not only were they struggling with the alphabet, but they also could not remember the days of the week, their address, their phone numbers and sometimes even their middle and last names. I knew about the relationship between prematurity and learning disabilities, but I realized, as we moved forward, that I had no idea what learning disabilities really were or how I was supposed to help them. I read to them every night, but it was no longer the same idyllic evening calm that reading brought to my other children. These girls would not let me read to them! They struggled to get free from my lap and ran as far away from the book as they could. They did love it when I told them stories from memory, but as soon as a book was involved, they could not disappear quickly enough. I was devastated. By kindergarten, it became clear that there was a problem, and when the child study team at their school evaluated them and gave them a diagnosis of “specific learning disability” (which we later learned was dyslexia) and a 60% placement in the school’s resource room (a pull-out program for reading and math), we were not surprised.

Everything that I knew about learning and teaching was different for Cass and Syd. School was a nightmare for them. No matter how smart I believed they were, the only measure of success in school is success in school, and they were not finding it. They could not read; they could not compute numbers and they could not remember things that the other children seemed to find effortless. School was a continuous struggle. I found that if I pushed

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a learning disability that would always have an impact on them. They had to work harder and differently and more to achieve what their equally capable peers could do in so much less time. Their disabilities would never go away, because that is not how disabilities work. They will always have to work harder, differently and more in order to achieve the same as other people. Most of the time, they don't feel sorry for themselves, but when they do, it is fleeting. They have such an intensive understanding of their challenges and strengths that there is very little room left for self-pity. Those brief moments are usually followed by thoughts of their accomplishments, both in spite of and because of their disabilities. When the time came to start looking at colleges, those same strengths and challenges were the crux of what we used for the search. We wanted to be absolutely sure that we found the best programs to fit all of their needs, both disability related and not. They each had different interests, different challenges and different strengths, and we played to all of that in the search. In the end, both girls won nearly full scholarships and admittance to honors programs at their respective universities. More importantly, both girls found their niche and paths toward fulfilling careers that play continuously to their strengths.

My girls were lucky. They had me, my husband and our whole family as constant advocates for their success. As I learned more and more about learning disabilities, eventually getting a doctorate with a focus on the study of dyslexia, I was able to even more effectively help my daughters. Because I learned how important it was for them to understand their disabilities, we insisted that they learn to understand their disabilities. Because I learned how important self-advocacy was going to be for them, we insisted that they practice it continuously. Because I learned that different colleges offered different kinds of services to address their needs, we were able to find the best and most appropriate fit for them academically, emotionally and socially. What became astounding during this process was that it seemed that we were in it alone. Despite good intentions, very few people at their school could partner in helping us. It became clear that the school counseling office in their high school believed that the child study team would be able to help guide us and that, at the same time, the child study team seemed to see the school counselors as the obvious choice for guidance about college. Each office seemed to work independently of the other, and the overlap that occurred had more to do with course selection on a yearly basis than working together to help students like my daughters. But again, we were lucky. I was a school counselor, and I knew about learning disabilities. By the end of high school, it seemed clear that my daughters were among the very small minority of their old resource room class to make it to college, let alone into honors programs. I could not help being proud. My daughters had worked hard and fought and did all the right things, but as I sat in the bleachers at graduation and spoke with parent after parent of the students who had been in that resource room

with my daughters, the obvious advantage of my knowledge base became clear. There was nothing that different between my daughters and all of their old classmates outside of the knowledge that I was able to bring into play to their advantage. Yes, they worked hard, and they deserved all the great things that were happening to them, and I was so very proud, but what about everyone else? Didn't those children work hard too? Hadn't those children been just as smart as my daughters? Didn't they deserve those advantages too? These thoughts colored my practice as a school counselor and changed the way I approached students with learning disabilities. As a school counselor, I realized that I had the opportunity to make sure that the same advantages that I was able to give my daughters would be shared with others as well.

As school counselors, it is our responsibility to reach every single student. It is on us to understand exactly what we are looking at when we see a student with a learning disability sitting in front of us. In 2015–2016, special education students comprised 13% of all students enrolled in public schools. Of these, 34% were diagnosed as having specific learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). As high school counselors, we are required to meet the needs of students with disabilities as well as the needs of general education students, even if their needs are different. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2017):

High school counselors are educators uniquely trained in child and adolescent development, learning strategies, self-management and social skills who understand and promote success for today's diverse students. They implement a comprehensive school counseling program to support students through this important developmental period. The program provides education, prevention and intervention activities, which are integrated into all aspects of students' lives. The program teaches knowledge, attitudes and skills students need to acquire in academic, career and social/emotional development, which serve as the foundation for future success. High school counselors do not work in isolation; rather they are integral to the total educational program. They provide a proactive program that engages students and includes leadership, advocacy and collaboration with school staff, administration and community/family members in the delivery of programs and activities to help students achieve success.

Young adults with learning disabilities attend 4-year colleges at half the rate of the general population. These students have lowered aspirations regarding postsecondary education and less confidence in achieving goals, are more likely to have some involvement with the criminal justice system and most markedly, are *less likely to have received support or guidance from teachers and school counselors about how to prepare for college* (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). In addition, the 4-year college completion rate for young

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adults with learning disabilities is 34%, compared to 52% in the general population. One in two young adults with learning disabilities reported having some type of involvement with the criminal justice system within 8 years of leaving high school, and one in three have been arrested. These students are more likely to have co-morbid social issues, tic disorders, ADD, depression, emotional regulating issues and anxiety (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

For those of us who work with children in poverty, the statistics are even more dire. The prevalence of reported learning disabilities is much higher among those living in poverty. Among all students over the age of 5, the rate of learning disabilities is 2.6% versus 1.5% for those living above poverty (Gartland & Strosnider, 2011). In general, students living in poverty attend college at much lower rates than their peers who do not live in poverty (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). For this population, the addition of a learning disability makes the possibility of college attendance even more miniscule.

School counselors are frequently the quiet voices in the background that teach, encourage and create opportunities where none exist. We are infrequently acknowledged, rarely thanked and occasionally misunderstood in terms of our roles. The beauty of it is that we don't care. All we care about is the fact that we have the honor and opportunity to help children, and it is this unique and quiet position in these children's lives that allows us to "work our magic." Our encouragement and belief have the power to convince a student that they are, indeed, intelligent and worthwhile. Our encouragement and belief have the power to let them feel as if they have finally been seen as the capable beings that they are. Many of us have been privileged enough to have seen firsthand the transformative power that encouragement and love can have on a child, but where do we begin when we lack knowledge about the very thing at the center of the struggles and challenges? When we don't understand what a learning disability is or the many ways it can impact a child, not only can we not help them, but we might even be hurting them instead. We cannot cast aside students with learning disabilities and decide they are someone else's problem or, worse yet, discount the needs of these students just because we don't understand them. When we do this, we have made a decision not to help them at all. As school counselors, our job is to be there for all children, not just the ones whose issues we understand and are familiar with. This book exists because I saw firsthand what could happen when children are encouraged, empowered and educated about who they really are. This book exists because we must, as educational professionals, make it our mission to become educated about what we do not yet know about this sizeable percentage of students. Through my own personal experiences with my daughters, it was clear to me that I needed to bring what I knew about high school students with learning disabilities into my practice as a high school counselor, and I was glad that my experiences could help so many of my students. As time went on, however, it also became clear to

me that this knowledge base that I had was somewhat unique. Most school counselors do not take coursework in special education topics. This means that many school counselors might not have an understanding of how to help students with learning disabilities prepare or have appropriate information about postsecondary programs and options for them. It became clear that I needed to share this information with my professional peers and work toward making the practice of school counseling even more powerful than it already is.

The book is divided into five distinct parts. The first four portions of the book present the information that will be the backbone of everything needed for working with students with learning disabilities. These chapters discuss the background of the book, common learning disabilities and related disorders and our role as counselors within the spectrum of working with students with learning disabilities. These parts of the book align with the program itself and give counselors specific and helpful information about topics such as college readiness, self-advocacy, strengths and challenges and choosing the right school. Within these topics, counselors will find information about working with their child study teams, learning how to read IEPs, specialized programs for students with learning disabilities and more. In addition, these chapters also present transcripts from actual interviews with young people with learning disabilities. The experiences of the young people in these interviews can help us understand the experience of students with learning disabilities and inform our practice as high school counselors in an impactful way.

Counselor preparation programs frequently do not present or require that counselors become familiar with learning disabilities or how they manifest. This book fills that gap. Given the high likelihood that we as counselors will have multiple students per grade and year with learning disabilities on our caseloads, this information is presented as both a resource for counselors about learning disabilities and also a springboard toward creating the effective groups for the program presented in the second portion of the book. The fifth portion of the book presents the program itself. While it is possible to implement the program without reading the first four portions of the book, it is best to read through the whole book for the program to give its maximum impact.

The final portion of the book presents the comprehensive program itself. This program was developed over many years of working with students with learning disabilities. The skills taught in the program are based on best practices and empirical research about what best helps these students find postsecondary success. Although the program is skills based, it does not exclude more in-depth discussion. It is meant to be implemented in small groups (8–10 students) over a period of between 6 and 10 weeks. Each portion is clearly marked and easily replicated, but as with all counseling-based groups,

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the idea is to work with your group as they grow rather than to follow explicit directions. It is meant more as a guide than as a step-by-step manual.

As we begin this journey together, it is important to remember that what we do, what we say and how we behave have an impact. As school counselors, we have the awe-inspiring honor and ability to be a part of changing young people's lives. If we consider this daily, we see that we have the ability to be a part of changing the world.

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