

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 20, 2022, 11:00 AM
CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR ERIC ADAMS PARTICIPATES IN PANEL SYMPOSIUM ON
DYSLEXIA AWARENESS**

Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri: Dyslexia education in our schools and our prison systems is massive and it's urgent. So today we're very excited to hear from some folks who can really make a big difference and are doing extraordinary work.

So to start with, I'm very honored to introduce Mayor Eric Adams, who as you know, he's announced the largest, most comprehensive approach to supporting students with dyslexia in the United States. For the first time all New York City students will be assessed and receive specialized instruction through programs and academies. I'm going to not spend a lot of time talking so that our panelists can get to share their thoughts. I'd love to ask Mr. Eric Adams, our wonderful mayor, to share why he cares so much about dyslexia and a little bit more about his wonderful program.

Mayor Eric Adams: Thank you, thank you, thank you so much and good morning. It's great to be here with so many — and I see Assemblyman Carroll is here, something that he too has leaned into the importance of universal literacy screening. And I want to thank all of you. Dyslexia doesn't stop at economic, ethnic, or gender boundaries. It impacts all of our young people. And really it's the pathway for young people to understand the opportunities, and it should not determine what is your economic status at the time. Far too often families like mine. I grew up in South Jamaica, Queens when my mother was not aware of some of the services that were available. I was diagnosed with dyslexia in my first year of college. I was lucky and stumbled onto that I had a learning disability.

When you think about — you hear far too often across the entire country, the substantial number of young men and women who are incarcerated because of learning disabilities. It was predicted 30 to 40 percent of our inmates at Rikers Island have dyslexia. And so we wanted to have a more forward thinking, upstream approach we would like to say. And that is to put in place literacy screening at the beginning of the educational experience in our schools. And we want to just thank all the advocates who have pushed for this for so long and the chancellor for introducing this into our educational system. It is the — probably one of the most, if not the most comprehensive approach to identifying not only dyslexia, but also other learning disabilities that a child may experience. So they can get the assistance and care as early as possible.

Those of us who are dyslexic, realize we just learn differently. And it's about identifying how we learn differently that would give us the tools to move forward. This is what we want to do in the Department of Education, and we want to continue to expand this as much as possible. We had two pilot projects that took place here in the city, one in the Bronx, and one in Harlem. And we want to learn from what those pilot projects are teaching us.

People often look at these first steps and they want the critique and criticism of perfect being the enemy of good. The goal is to start. The goal is not to wait until it's perfect. The goal is to start and learn how do you evolve? And so for those of us who remember this first step we are taking of this is just the iPod. We're going to go to the iPhone and we going to go to other levels until finally we get to the level that we believe is perfect. But we are not afraid to start. We're leaning into these difficult conversations. We're leaning into these historical problems that we've been denied for so many years.

So I'm excited about the panelists who are here. Let's collaborate. Let's figure out how we can get the perfection that all of our children deserve. Right now there's an Eric Adam sitting inside school believing that he's dumb and not believing that he has the opportunities and we want to change that paradigm forever.

Pal-Chaudhuri: Thank you so much. Mayor Adams, you have inspired us and it's very exciting to see what you're doing here. This is really a game changing program. I'd love to ask you just a little bit more about your aims with this program. What are your plans and how do you plan to achieve them?

Mayor Adams: Well, it's in both levels. Number one, we must do the early screening. Second, we must bring technology into how this is done. When you look at some of the new technologies and some of the partners we're looking and not only in startups but some of the traditional technology companies that are also in this space and looking at how we could quickly do the proper diagnosis. What we have really removed from our educational experience, those who are neurologists. It's amazing that we spend so much time trying to figure out what children learn and not how they learn. The brain is a tool and those who study neuroscience, those who are neurologists, they should have very much a part of our educational experience to understand how the brain actually operate.

And then we must instruct our teachers. Our teachers must know what to look for, how to do this type of instruction and how to make sure the early we identify of any learning disability of any sort, to really buy into the understanding the greater opportunity that children understand how they learn differently and how they can be empowered by their experience.

And lastly, we need to be open to listen to those who have leaned into this work for many years. This administration we don't come into this work believing we have all the answers. We have a heck of a lot of questions. I'm still in my why years I like to say. We have a lot of questions and the goal is to go to those who have worked in these fields and have advocated for them and say, help us shape the program. That's what we did. I think about Debbie, who's here, how she has been helpful throughout the years on fighting this issue and getting it done right, and those who

have always been on the forefront of this issue. So it's a combination of using the expertise that's already in our school system using technology and going to those advocates that have been on the forefront of these issues for a long time. But our instructional population, our teachers, our principals, they must be part of this movement as well.

Pal-Chaudhuri: Thank you so much. So on that note, I'm going to ask Yoel Greenfeld to share a few words. He has been a principal for 20 years in the New York school systems. He is the founder of CanAdvance. He's worked with children with difficulties in academics and behavior and helped hundreds of students achieve lasting success. His expertise was formed as a teacher and principal for 20 years he encountered far too many children with reading disabilities. I'm going to pass the mic to him.

Yoel Greenfeld: First of all, thank you, Mr. Mayor. Your words have moved me many ways. Just a little bit about my background. I'm born and raised in Melbourne, Australia. I live now in the states now for 20 plus years. I'm a proud American citizen and being through the educational system, I was a (inaudible) teacher, my father being a principal, headmaster in Melbourne, Australia for 40 plus years, my grandmother being one of the ground founders of education in Melbourne, Australia from after the war. I say that my DNA is education. I'm here for it.

One of the biggest concerns I've seen through my years in the school system: there's so many different approaches out there for those children that need help. My question was always, when do we get this child back into class? How much are we spending on help in this program and that program? I saw so many kids falling out of the system in first, second or third grade. I say it as a joke, most of the times they stopped the mentoring system is either when the funds ran out or the tutor quit.

My goal, my mission, my life mission is to tell everybody out there that has any type of learning delay problems, if it's dyslexia, whatever it is, reading delayed, learning delayed. There is hope. I'm happy to say last year in 2021, our clinic puts over 400 students back into class. This is a big number. And I love what the mayor said through today's technology, I don't take a kid and say, you got to know this stuff. It doesn't work, can't stuff it down their throats. We got to adapt to them. Get their wiring in their brain, wire it properly. I've had the privilege to work with many neurologists in the university from NYU, I've had the privilege of working with them. We've put so many kids back into the system.

I had a story. I just married off my daughter last week and I had somebody that showed up and said he came to me at the end of the summer, this child is a 6-year-old boy. He was diagnosed for ASD and was told he needs to see a special needs school. I saw the child, I told the parents, this child is premature to diagnose for ASD. This kid does not hear. His ears are blocked. Take him to an ENT. We got him to an ENT. He was diagnosed. He had two issues. He was very blocked with fluid, so we put in the tubes and we found that he has flaps in his left ear. And for those that know what flaps mean in the ear, it will disturb the way that the child is picking up outside information. So for sure he looks ASD he's not connecting to the environment. This child went through the procedure, the father came to the wedding and said, my kid is in school, he's doing great. He's up to par, he had some touring to get him there, but he's there.

I made it my mission, my life mission, I'm going to do whatever it takes. I got a big toolbox. I'm a Tomatis level four consultant, for those that know, it's a program out of Paris, becoming more and more known here in New York. When I started it was only one, today we have like 10, 20 new practitioners. I used the interactive management program. We have a big briefcase. My goal is get the child back into the system without even knowing that he's doing therapy to get back into the system. With the help of everybody here on the panel today, I think that we got to scream out there, there's hope there. The children deserve it. They are our new generation, the next generation and we got to give them the opportunity they deserve. I'm privileged to be here today. Thank you.

Mayor Adams: Thanks a lot.

Pal-Chaudhuri: Thank you so much. So I'm going to turn the mic over to Chris Etienne from the STEM Program Coordinator for the Prison Initiatives at Princeton University. Chris, I'm going to ask you if you can focus on talking about the need for dyslexia in the prison systems and then we'll open up for broader discussion afterwards.

Chris Etienne: Okay, thank you. So I guess I will first just say hi to everybody. Good morning. Thank you for having me here. It's truly an honor to be in the presence of so many people doing this type of work. So first and foremost, I want to state that I'm just as impacted. So that means that I have been to prison. I served time in prison. I served roughly six years in the prison system. And what I found interesting, when I transitioned into the prison system I did so after being a high school dropout, I dropped out of high school roughly around 10th grade, at the beginning of 10th grade. When I transitioned to the prison system, I realized that there was a lot of similarities between my background and the people who I was incarcerated with.

So, currently in our public schools in the United States 25 percent of students in these public schools suffer from some type of learning disability. And that's the population of students or the students that also drop out of schools or get pushed out of these high schools. Unfortunately, students in prison don't have access to the systems that they need to effectively participate in education when they're dealing with learning disabilities. While I was serving my sentence, I didn't really see any resources. If you were dyslexic, if you were visually impaired to a certain extent, if you had issues hearing, if you were using American sign language you weren't really present in those classrooms, that resource was snatched from you because there was no means to get you access to navigating this education that you needed. There was no resources available there.

So currently with Princeton University and the Prison Teaching Initiative, we've been taking new approaches to learning. One of them is universal designer learning. So this type of learning ensures that individuals who are dyslexic, individuals who may have certain hearing challenges and individuals who just need stimulation are able to access this curriculum that's placed in front of them. Because we're using things like visual cues, we're using sound, we're doing community centered approaches where we're speaking about different issues impacting their communities and bringing it into the classroom and allowing them to problem-solve as they engage in class.

Another issue that we're attempting to navigate is figuring out how do we have our students diagnosed? We know that the APA is responsible for students being diagnosed and unfortunately we see that there's often challenges having them present in prisons to diagnose these students. And what I proposed, but it's a little bit ambitious, would be a way to approach this on a national level where every student in public high schools will have access to the APA system and be diagnosed prior to issues of dropout or high school push out happen. I think that's the best approach. Currently we're setting up tools for people who are incarcerated, but we're also looking to be proactive when it comes to this and utilize our resources to try to catch students prior to the dropout stage and prior to the incarceration stage so we could be preventative rather than being reactionary to these problems and attempting to repair the harm after it already took place.

Pal-Chaudhuri: It's wonderful to hear your remarks about the prison system. I'd love to ask our honorable mayor perhaps to respond if there is any initiatives for the prison system and your thoughts in that area.

Mayor Adams: Yes, and I think that's a powerful commentary, because sometimes we think about those who are in the educational system but we don't go back and assist those who have been denied the services in the first place. So it's about intervention and prevention. Intervention, we feel, are the things we are doing right now. How do we go after those young people? Then prevention, we think, are the long-term things we must do. But it's also about putting the dollars there. We're allocating \$7.4 million to this initiative and then we're going into Rikers Island where we are going to be rolling out our screening for those who are currently incarcerated because we want to go back and help those who have been betrayed.

So when we have those who are in our prison system, not only here in the city, we are hoping this extends throughout the entire state. But the goal is while you are inside to get your diagnosis, if you are dyslexic or have another literacy or learning disability that you can get the assistance you need while inside so you can come out and continue the support when you're out so that you can live a productive life. Because if you are not properly diagnosed when you're in jail, then you're going to come out still having some of the same difficulties around education, around training, around employment. So you are not assisting if you don't continue to address the issues on all the ends of the spectrum. Not only those young people who are in school now, but those who the system has betrayed throughout the years.

Pal-Chaudhuri: That is very exciting to hear your approach. I'd like to now introduce Ingrid Poupart. She's the founder of Neuralign nonprofit and this is created by dyslexic for dyslexic. Neuralign helps dyslexic and learning disabled students achieve success in reading, build confidence and reduce anxiety. Ingrid has an announcement to make about some studies that have been done on some of the new technologies. So I will let her take it from here, but I hope that she'll share with us the exciting news.

Ingrid Poupart: Thank you Andreani, and thank you everybody for being here and what a pleasure it is to be sitting here.

I will say I am dyslexic severely and I am very nervous. So excuse any words that don't come out because that will happen when you're dyslexic, but I'm sitting amongst colleagues who know what it feels like. So that's always a big help.

I started my journey probably 30 years ago, 35 years ago when my youngest daughter was diagnosed. Working in the school system, just like Yoel, I came across many, many students who suffered from dyslexia or reading difficulty or other LD problems, sorry. And from there I became a facilitator for many programs including Tomatis. Including IMs. I was a Orton-Gillingham trainer, but I knew we had to do something with technology. It was actually my oldest son, co-founder as well, who said, we have to build something. Something that's going to help students engage them and be with the times, and that's really it. Students now that's what they know and they feel more comfortable. Engaging them with computer programs, gamified computer programs is what is making the difference now. So we built.

We're in the middle of a few studies and just recently we did get some results back and it's very exciting. We did a lot of surveys as well and as Andreani said, so we're noticing from the studies that 50 percent of students are increasing 50 percent of words within 10 weeks. That's a huge undertaking. That's huge for these students who have to do years and years just to get up a month or two months or a year of work. For these students, what I wish for them is that they get out to play, not to get out and do tutoring, that they can be with their friends and do the things that are important to them. So that was our mission and we continue with it and we're seeing fantastic results.

I just had a call last week with Dr. Julian Foundation who came on board and that's really underprivileged students in Montreal, that's who they target. One student who could not do the program, started it and then stopped and then started and stopped. They've been trying to get this student to associate the letters with the sound for over two years and they would do it at the tutoring center, but then this child would forget about it when he got to the classroom. And this time when he got to the classroom and he did four sessions, which was amazing. And he could remember he was reading words off the blackboard and doing things and the teacher was so impressed, she now has asked us to go into the classroom. So this is how we get in and this is when we see these type of differences, we know we're on the right path. So that's it for me. Thank you.

Pal-Chaudhuri: Thank you, Ingrid. I just wanted to add to that because I am myself an advocate for neurodiversity and I've been really excited about the new technologies that are coming online, that there are ways that we can expedite, we can supplement and help the teachers who are so taxed in our current school system. So I know our mayor has only a few moments. I'm going to turn the mic back to him, but I'm going to ask him what the role of new technologies are, how do we make sure that our school systems are really up-to-date and using this kind of exciting research 50 percent improvement in 10 weeks as an average, what the Carleton University reports are showing from some of these technologies. So turning it over to you.

Mayor Adams: Thank you. Thank you. And really my presence here today is really to just emphasize how this is paramount for our administration. We believe that for far too long we've ignored this important issue and families have suffered. I wanted to take time out of my day just

to come in and show my visible support instead of just sending a staffer. This is crucial to me. It's not only professional, it's personal, and we are focused on that.

How we use technology. In government we are caught up in the whirlwind, the day-to-day, keeping the lights on, the trains running on time. And sometimes that could consume us and we lose focus on the innovation. We have a separate part of our administration that is not focused on the day-to-day making sure the trains run on time. It's completely dealing with innovation. We are looking across the globe. How do we use the new technologies that are available to assist us in the historic problems we have been facing? And we have been looking at and partnering with many of the new technologies that are available and we're going to slowly roll them out in our Department of Education, in our correctional facilities, in our foster care entities. You will find in every place from homeless services across the board where individuals are dealing with troubling times of access to services in our city. There's a large portion that are dealing with learning disabilities. The betrayals started early and the betrayal continues. Just as we are using technologies on how to run our cities better, we need to use those same technologies on how to early identify learning disabilities to give people the opportunity they deserve.

So again, thank you for allowing me to come here today. I just really wanted to show my presence to extend a clear message that this is the top of the agenda for this administration. And all those children that are out there, they can point towards City Hall and say, our mayor's dyslexic. And if he was able to become the mayor of the greatest city on the globe, then they could become whomever they want to become at the same time. Thank you very much.

###