

Mayor Adams Unveils Program to Address Dyslexia in N.Y.C. Schools

The mayor, who has dyslexia himself, would open two new schools, train teachers and direct schools to use phonics-based lessons as a way to address a literacy crisis in the city.



By Lola Fadulu

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Mayor Eric Adams announced Thursday the details of a plan to turn around a literacy crisis in New York City and, in particular, to serve thousands of children in public schools who may have dyslexia, an issue deeply personal to the mayor, who has said his own undiagnosed dyslexia hurt his academic career.

School officials plan to screen nearly all students for dyslexia, while 80 elementary schools and 80 middle schools will receive additional support for addressing the needs of children with dyslexia. The city will also open two new dyslexia programs — one at P.S. 125 Ralph Bunche in Harlem and the other at P.S. 161 Juan Ponce de Leon in the South Bronx — with a goal of opening similar programs in each borough by 2023.

Officials also plan to train all teachers, and will create a new dyslexia task force. School leaders are requiring school principals to pivot to a phonics-based literacy curriculum, which literacy experts say is the most effective way to teach reading to most children.

“Dyslexia holds back too many of our children in school but most importantly in life,” Mr. Adams said during a press briefing Thursday morning, adding that it “haunts you forever until you can get the proper treatment that you deserve.”

New York is facing a literacy crisis: Fewer than half of all third to eighth graders and just 36 percent of Black and Latino students were proficient on the state reading exams administered in 2019, the most recent year for which there is data. Research suggests that the coronavirus pandemic has only worsened those outcomes.

The lack of easily accessible academic support for children with dyslexia has been an issue that has been top of mind for the mayor. He has said his own dyslexia went undiagnosed for years because his mother didn’t have the necessary information to get him screened. He recalled “not wanting to come into school every day because I just couldn’t keep up.”

Developing a universal dyslexia screening program in the city’s schools was one of the few specific policy prescriptions the mayor offered during his campaign. He has devoted \$7.4 million in his proposed budget for addressing dyslexia and other literacy issues.

“We are going to have the largest, most comprehensive approach to supporting students with dyslexia in the country,” Mr. Adams said.

The new policy was met with applause by a group who has called for reading reforms in the city.

“The plans announced today could have a transformative impact if implemented well,” Kim Sweet, the executive director for Advocates for Children of New York, said in a statement, adding that the group looked forward to working with education officials to ensure that “all children learn to read, no matter where they go to school.”

It is difficult to say how many children have dyslexia in the city because the department hasn’t been able to systematically identify them, said Carolyne Quintana, the deputy chancellor for teaching and learning. But she noted that national figures estimate that one in five children have dyslexia.

Currently, getting support for children with dyslexia or other learning disabilities can be onerous.

Parents, school principals or other school officials must first refer a child for a dyslexia evaluation, to which parents must consent. The education department then has 60 days to complete an initial assessment. After, officials determine whether the child needs special education services and develop an individualized program.

Many families with greater financial means often opt out of the time-consuming process and into private tutoring instead. Advocates and families say low-income and Black and Latino families have more difficulty getting their children identified and accessing services.

“Screenings are expensive, they cost hundreds of dollars, many families can’t afford it, particularly in Black and brown, multi-language communities, those communities that are struggling economically,” Mr. Adams said.

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Naomi Peña said she has four children with dyslexia, and is one of several parents who helped launch the Literacy Academy Collective, an advocacy group.

“I know all too well the pain of trying to advocate to support my children to read,” Ms. Peña said through tears on Thursday morning. “I was desperate to find support, my only option was costly tutoring programs all because my children’s learning styles could not be met in a classroom.”

Under the new plan, all children in kindergarten through second grade will be screened for literacy three times per year. Acadience Learning, an educational company, will provide the screenings. Children in grades three through 10 will also be screened three times per year, but principals will get to choose from three screener options, said Ms. Quintana.

If a child consistently performs below benchmarks, they will be recommended for a secondary screening, which will look for dyslexia and other language-based disabilities, said Ms. Quintana.

Once children are identified as at-risk, they will be recommended for a neuropsychology evaluation. Some schools have partnered with a nonprofit group, Promise Project at Columbia University Medical Center, to help low-income families afford the assessment, which can sometimes cost thousands of dollars.

The students will then receive either additional support at their current schools or enroll at one of the two new programs, which will open this fall.

The additional support includes more intensive instruction steeped in the Orton-Gillingham approach, which teaches reading with more hands-on methods that break down words into smaller, more digestible parts. District-based coordinators will work with all schools to adjust instruction and provide intervention for those students.

The Literacy Academy Collective will be piloting second and third grade classrooms at P.S. 161 in the fall, and each class will have 15 to 18 students from that school, said Ruth Genn, one of the co-founders of the nonprofit. The goal is to eventually open a separate school and work with children in kindergarten through eighth grade.

The Lab School for Family Literacy will be running the program at P.S. 125, where two grade levels — either first and second or second and third — will each have a separate class for struggling readers. Teachers of those classes will be trained in the Orton-Gillingham approach in a 10-day intensive program.

Schools Chancellor David C. Banks said the department would look to these schools for lessons learned as it expands dyslexia programming to other boroughs.

“They will be labs of innovation for us,” Mr. Banks said.

The full-day programs won’t be the first in the city. The Bridge Preparatory Charter School, which opened in Staten Island in 2019, is the state’s first and only public school created to help children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. City officials have worked closely with the school’s officials to learn more about the programming.

The chancellor and other education officials have also spent time studying the methods used at the Windward School, a private school with campuses in both New York City and White Plains that primarily serves children with dyslexia. Ms. Quintana said teachers from the Windward school would be training teachers from other schools in helping children with dyslexia.

Under the new plan, school officials will require principals, who can choose their curriculums, shift toward a reading program that is based in reading science. Many currently use one developed by Lucy Calkins, an academic at Teachers College, Columbia University, that has repeatedly come under fire.

Officials will require principals to choose from a handful of phonics-based curriculums to include as part of their comprehensive reading programs, such as Foundations, Really Great Reading and Preventing Academic Failure, said Ms. Quintana.

Mr. Adams and Mr. Banks — both Black men who attended the city’s public schools — have said that addressing the city’s reading crisis, especially eliminating racial disparities in literacy outcomes, is a top priority. The mayor often talks about reading in relation to the school-to-prison pipeline, noting that around 30 to 40 percent of prison inmates have dyslexia.

State officials have also been brainstorming ways to help children with dyslexia.

Assemblyman Robert C. Carroll, who represents the 44th District of Brooklyn, co-wrote a bill that would direct the state to form a panel of experts to develop guidelines for universal screening, evidence-based curriculum interventions and training programs for teachers.

Mr. Carroll said he was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was in the first grade and then attended two specialized schools.

“Having that individualized, evidence-based curriculum that was sequential, multi-sensory and rooted in phonics allowed me to become a successful student and reader and writer,” he said. The bill passed the State Assembly on Wednesday, and is now awaiting action in the Senate.

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