

# David Flink on Teaching Kids to Have Pride in Learning Differences

**NEWS** David Flink, leader of the Eye to Eye mentorship and awareness program, talks to us about appreciating students with different learning abilities.

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**RISING ABOVE:** Advocating for people with disabilities, Flink ensured his mentorship program included mentors with learning disabilities, empowering them to empower others just like them.

**Personally, what do you feel was your greatest struggle in school and how did you overcome it?**

**David Flink:** It was in my younger years — the number one challenge I had was around stigma. The perception of learning disabilities in school then (and unfortunately in some still today) was that there is something wrong with the child. That is probably the hardest thing I had to deal with. The inability to say with pride that I learn differently held me back tremendously.

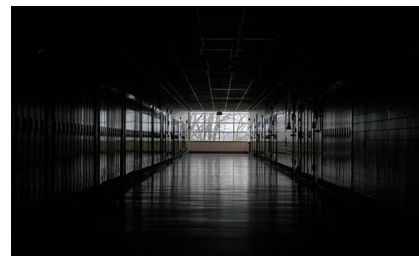
**How did Eye to Eye come to be the instrument for change that it is today?**

The unique thing we have done to be so successful is involve people who have the living experience. The fact that every one of our mentors has a learning disability is crucial. When they sit down with kids and share strategies — often times very similar strategies that well-intentioned teachers and others have said — the difference is that our mentor can deliver that message in a way that no one else can. They can say, “Look, I sat literally in that seat, I know what it felt like having trouble with reading, and here I am in college succeeding.” The delivery of the message is as important as the message itself — sometimes we forget that.

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**What has been your greatest achievement through Eye to Eye and your book, Thinking Differently?**

I would say sending a couple of our students to the White House to meet with Michelle Obama. She was working on the Reach Higher campaign, which encourages all students to pursue their education past high school, and we were there representing



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decided to include us.

**If you could give one piece of advice to those with learning disabilities regarding their future, what would it be? How about for parents on how to empower their child with a learning disability?**

For parents I would say communicating with their kids about their experience and allowing them to find hope in their community. There is a lot of research now that says if your kid has a learning disability, there is around a 75 percent chance that you do too. You might be your child's best mentor. For students I would say do not push back the accommodations, but instead, lean into them. It's okay to use accommodations for the rest of their lives. Kids must know that, parents must believe in their kids and have high expectations, and teachers should be available to provide every possible accommodation to lead to success.

**The awareness surrounding this topic has spread throughout the education system. Do you feel that most institutions are taking action or are there still gaps?**

There has definitely been progress, but I do think that there are still gaps. The stigma is still there and, while accommodations are readily available, there is still the feeling that we will give it to students because it is required by law, but you would be better off if you didn't take them. That is a backwards way of making the change. Not just in school, but in life.

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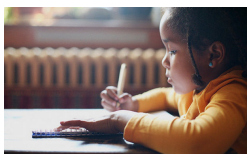
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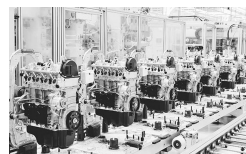
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