

# Changing the lives of students and families in Texas



Learning Ally opens up a world of knowledge and literature for Austin ISD students with dyslexia

# Austin Independent School District and Learning Ally



At the heart of public education in Austin, Texas is the Austin Independent School District. Austin ISD educates approximately 84,000 students and embraces 130 diverse school communities in one of the fastest-growing metropolises in the country. Of the students enrolled in Austin ISD, just over 50,000 are Hispanic, and 48,000 economically disadvantaged.

Continually reinventing the urban school experience, Austin ISD is a champion for every child; and as a leader in providing specialized instruction to students with special needs, has recognized the need to help those who struggle with reading and have been identified with a print-based reading disability. The most common form of this type of learning disability is dyslexia, often referred to as the disability that “hides in plain sight.”

According to Rachel Robillard PhD, LSSP Assistant Director–504 Services & Response to Intervention for the district, “Dyslexia impacts 10-20 percent of students in K-12 with varying levels of severity. Dyslexia is not a disorder that can be compartmentalized; it is not just a deficit, but carries with it inherent strengths. When dyslexia goes unidentified and undiagnosed, these strengths are often suppressed; and the lack of understanding frequently leads to both student and staff frustration. It is not uncommon for unidentified dyslexic students to perform significantly below their academic potential. . . Unidentified, their underlying strengths may never be discovered.”

To help students with dyslexia to succeed in school, and to capitalize on their strengths, Austin ISD uses audiobook technology from Learning Ally, a nonprofit organization that supports students who read and learn differently due to dyslexia, blindness, visual impairment, and other disabilities.

Learning Ally boasts a collection of 80,000+ human-narrated audio textbooks and literature titles, all of which can be downloaded by students and teachers, and read using computers, smartphones and tablets. Many of the most popular audiobook titles feature VOICEtext, allowing students to follow along with the audio as they read synchronized highlighted text on their devices. In addition, Learning Ally’s technology allows students to read outside of the classroom on a computer or any iOS or Android device, using their teacher-assigned account.

Beginning in 2013, there were 272 students in Austin ISD enrolled in the Learning Ally program. Within two years, the program has seen a dramatic increase in usage and enrollment, today encompassing more than 2,700



**The Learning Ally program is offered through a partnership with the Texas Education Agency. A full statewide membership allows all K-12 public and charter schools in Texas to have access to Learning Ally services at no cost.**





students. Just three months into the 2015-2016 school year, there were already close to 18,000 books added to these students' digital Learning Ally bookshelves.

*"Learning Ally opens up a new world of literature and knowledge to kids who, due to their disability, would otherwise be left in the dark. It's imperative to share this resource with our community and others who will benefit."*

—LEANDRA TREVINO, 504/Dyslexia Compliance Specialist

According to Heather Hardeman, the parent of two dyslexic students at Doss Elementary School in Austin ISD, Texas and co-founder of the Dyslexia Parent Network, "My son quickly went from having daily meltdowns about reading and homework to racing home after school to 'ear read' yet another book! Not only did it boost his confidence in reading (and in school overall), he was able to read what his peers were reading, and most importantly, he started loving school again.

"He says that Learning Ally changed his life, and it did. He is now a voracious ear reader and it is a daily challenge to get him off of his audiobooks. What an amazingly wonderful problem to have as the parent of a dyslexic student! He uses it both at home and in school every day."

In addition to affecting the school and home lives of Austin students, the Learning Ally program is helping families change their lives as well.

"Learning Ally has also had a ripple effect on the rest of our family," continued Ms. Hardeman. "The level of stress went down and the level of vocabulary and interest in reading went up. Recently, we found out his little brother is dyslexic, too. We cannot say enough about how much we LOVE and NEED Learning Ally. It has changed our lives."

*The Learning Ally program  
has ignited a reading movement  
among students, teachers  
and their parents.*

*"Learning Ally is life-changing. It allows my students to gain confidence and get excited about reading. They are learning that books are treasures."*

—KRISTY MATHIEU, teacher at Kiker Elementary School

MS. MATHIEU INVITED SOME OF HER STUDENTS WHO ARE READING WITH LEARNING ALLY TO OFFER THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE PROGRAM AS WELL:

*"I like that Learning Ally is fun and helpful — I can read books that I would have never dreamed of before."* —SUSAN

*"I like that Learning Ally shows me the words, so my brain does not get mixed up."* —JOSIE

*"Learning Ally has made reading fun! I like that it reads to me and helps me learn."* —KYLA



Now these students, who had long struggled to read, cannot get enough of their favorite books, and are keeping up with assigned class texts at the same time. While becoming avid readers in class for the first time in their lives, students are excited and motivated to read, both at school and at home with their computers and devices.



Austin ISD exemplifies what great teachers, great parents, and the right technology can do to enhance and enrich the lives of students who struggle with reading, and help them reach their goals and achieve their dreams. As the Learning Ally program continues to grow in Austin ISD, so will the confidence, achievements and success of its students.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the Learning Ally program in Texas, or to enroll your school or district, contact Rhea Thompson, Learning Ally Texas Program Manager at [rthompson@learningally.org](mailto:rthompson@learningally.org).

[LearningAlly.org/Texas](https://LearningAlly.org/Texas)

