

This is what someone with dyslexia looks likeand here is what she is asking you to do during Dyslexia Awareness Month



Landmark School, First day of school, 1988



Landmark School Graduation, 2019

This is what someone with dyslexia looks like

These pictures capture two life-changing days in my life. The first is from my first day of three years attending *Landmark School* (1988 – *check out that '80's hair!*), and the second, taken 31 years later in 2019, is when I earned an honorary full diploma from *Landmark School* and served as their Graduation Day speaker.

October is **Dyslexia Awareness Month**, and I wanted to share the story and picture of what a person with dyslexia looks like - *me!* - and to thank the educators at schools across the country that work with non-traditional learners, like me. The expertise and creativity of these specialized educators changed my life.

In 3rd grade, when other students were reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* (or maybe these days *Harry Potter*), I was struggling to read the most basic of entry level books, like *Biscuit the Dog* (or maybe these days *Pete the Cat*). For me, being dyslexic was not just about barriers to reading, it was about challenges with *decoding*. The foreign languages of math, music, the periodic tables, French, Spanish, Latin, were, and largely remain, a mystery to me. Attending an Approved School as a young student taught me that there are other students like me, that we are smart, we excel at critical thinking, we can become self-advocates, and we can master skills with the right teaching and supports. In my own case, *Landmark School* got me on the path to successfully completing college, law school, rising to senior positions with the City of Boston and the Massachusetts Port Authority, and today serving as the executive director of Massachusetts' association for schools serving students with special needs, known as maaps.

Approved Schools for Students with Specialized Needs

Landmark School is one of dozens of specialized schools for specialized learners in our Commonwealth. In fact, more than 80 schools that are members of maaps offer instruction and programs specialized for individual learners, like me. From A or Z, or literally *Amego, Inc.* to *Willie Ross School for the Deaf*, it's accurate to say Massachusetts and New England actually specialize in serving special learners.

Something I am deeply proud of is that more than 95% of these specialized schools represented by maaps are already open during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 70% are fully open, with every student on campus--which is remarkable. Similarly remarkable, the residential programs for students with special needs

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were the only schools in the Commonwealth that never closed, remaining open throughout the challenges of the pandemic in order to best serve the students who attend these special schools.

Of course, to be open during a pandemic comes with a large number of health and safety precautions, including the need for protective equipment and facility changes. While I may not know French, and I never memorized the periodic tables, it is clear to me that we cannot expect and require specialized schools to be and remain open without giving them tools they need to be open safely. My maaps member schools have amassed literally millions of dollars in added expenses to stay open during COVID-19, but they have received only minuscule reimbursement. As grateful as we are for what aid we have received, a number of schools are under deep financial strain now, and some have had to close or merge.

Join me in Taking Action

No matter what your special ability is (and yes, I consider dyslexia a special ability not *disability*), I urge you to **join me in contacting Congress** to urge them to make sure specialized schools that educate public school students receive COVID-19 funding, so that these schools can stay open during the pandemic:

<https://maaps.org/action-network-center/?vvsrsrc=%2fcampaigns%2f77583%2frespond>

During this Dyslexia Awareness Month, I wanted to share with you what *this* dyslexic looks like and what she is grateful for – the approved special education schools and educators who specialize in this important work – *thank you*. Please join me in supporting these schools, these students, and these educators who are helping students maximize their potential, every day.