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Trump, dyslexia and the classroom

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Last week, President Donald J. Trump unjustly lambasted Governor Gavin Newsom of California in an interview at the Oval Office. In the latest escalation between the two political giants, Trump attacked Newsom's life-long diagnosis of dyslexia, a common neurobiological learning condition that causes difficulty with reading and spelling. The president claimed Newsom's condition should disqualify him from running for the presidential office. In his words, "a president should not have learning difficulties." In a follow-up interview, Trump doubled down. He claimed that he is "all for people with learning disabilities, but not for [ ] president — a president should not have learning disabilities." As someone who works in special education, I am appalled at Trump's ignorance. As a human being, I am abhorred at his bigoted language. Trump's ableist attack against Governor Gavin Newsom is not just inaccurate, but a gross representation of our society's wider bias against disabled people's futures.

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For one, Trump's claim that having a learning disability diagnosis "is not a good thing" is laughably ignorant in the face of both historical precedent and scientific fact. His belief that such a disability should disqualify a candidate from higher office ignores the many great American presidents who have had a learning disability. George Washington was diagnosed with dyslexia, the same condition Gavin Newsom has been open about. John F. Kennedy had ADHD. Abraham Lincoln, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson and Thomas Jefferson all had similar conditions. These names represent the leaders of our nation who led us through the birth of our nation, and played key roles in defining the ideals America would strive towards. If their conditions had disqualified them from office, as Trump wishes, it is hard to imagine our nation looking in any way as it does now. His claim further ignores the scientific fact that these so-called "disabilities" can in many situations be a blessing. Individuals with dyslexia, for one, have been found to possess enhanced creative problem-solving skills, high-level pattern recognition and strong visual-spatial skills. All these traits are crucial to holding high office, where decisions can impact the entire world. Indeed, our nation may be in a better place if President Trump displayed just one of these qualities.

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The precedent set by Trump's remark that disabled learners cannot and should not find success is nothing new. Those with learning disabilities have long faced prejudice in America, despite the remarkable contributions they have provided us. From the earliest stages of life, individuals with a learning disability face expectations of failure. In our schools, where one in five children are diagnosed with dyslexia, only one-tenth receive specialized support. Even then, these special education programs often fail to bring students up-to-speed, in part due to a limited and underfunded workforce. Those left behind struggle alone in classes where they are, as Trump's language demonstrates, branded "stupid" and "low IQ." Yet the support offered to the minority — those deemed to need it the most — is not better. As a result of a dissonance between state standards and classroom expectations, higher-needs students often fall behind their peers outside their concentrated learning environments. As a result of these systemic failures, students with a learning disability diagnosis are continually expected to achieve less and less. This self-fulfilling prophecy fuels these students to be set up only for the bare minimum: they are taught just enough to graduate the K-12 system, where they can enter the workforce as grocers and menial laborers. While this may be an ideal plan for some, it does not justify such a goal being placed on those who want to achieve some other path in life. Our system's expectation of failure is what best explains why 18% of students with learning disabilities drop out of primary and secondary school, and why only 5% will attend college.

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What Trump said last week is inexcusably wrong. He must be held accountable and apologize to the community of over 12 million Americans who he has belittled. Yet, the apology of one man is not enough to alleviate decades of systemic bias against diagnosed learners. More pressing is our need to bring reform to a society that systematically disvalues the potential of those deemed "different". Right now, our next great American president is sitting in a classroom, falling behind by no fault of their own. It is our responsibility.



Gavin Newsom speaking at a press tour for his new autobiography, "Young Man In A Hurry." Newsom has been very candid about his experience with dyslexia and he emphasizes that won't stop him from running as a presidential candidate.

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President Donald Trump sits while speaking. Recently, the President spoke out against supporting Gavin Newsom, as well as any others who have a learning disability and hope to run for president.

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