

Irlen syndrome linked to reading woes



By **CYNTHIA McCORMICK**

Dayna Bowman has Irlen Syndrome, which is a rare reading disorder. It's corrected by using color overlays on written pages or color glasses. Bowman's glasses are pink but when she wears them she sees regular colors (normally & not the color in the lenses).

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For years, Tracy Bowman of Buzzards Bay tried to get her elementary-school-age daughter to pick up a book and read. She stocked her home with the newest children's literature and beloved classics. But Bowman ended up reading the Junie B. Jones books out loud to Dayna, now 10, after the child complained that reading hurt her eyes. Bowman had her daughter's vision tested. It was fine. The staff at James F. Peebles Elementary School had Dayna tested for learning disabilities. She was fine. Some people thought Dayna might just be lazy, but when Bowman saw her vivacious, active daughter getting off the bus every day in tears after another failure in school, she knew something else was going on. "She couldn't read like her friends did," Bowman says. "It was breaking my heart. I would have to read her homework directions to her."

Dayna's teachers puzzled over her case, too. Then, on a hunch, a Bourne special education teacher had the girl tested for a little-known perceptual problem called Irlen syndrome. Also known as scotopic sensitivity syndrome, Irlen syndrome causes problems with the nervous system's understanding of visual information, such as printing. Most sufferers are bothered by light sensitivity, especially fluorescent lights. Reading makes them feel strained or sleepy and can give them headaches — which is not surprising, since words seem to move around the page, and readers have trouble finding their place. Really bad cases of Irlen syndrome can make it almost impossible for sufferers to sit down and read for any period of time. Children with milder cases may be good readers who don't progress as much in their instruction as teachers expect. "I'd never heard of it before," Bowman says. Diane Godfrey, the special education teacher, explained that Dayna saw the written page differently from other people. "It was like looking at an optical illusion all the time," Bowman says.

The solution to Dayna's reading problems was surprisingly simple. All Dayna required to put her back on track with her peer group was to have a transparent colored overlay placed on her reading material. Irlen expert Georgianna Saba of Medford determined that the best color transparency for Dayna was pink, so now the girl goes to school with an 8-by-10-inch, rose-colored transparent page to put over her schoolwork. She also was fitted with a pair of nonprescription glasses with pink-tinted lenses. The transformation was amazing, Bowman says. "Dayna is now getting the best report card she ever had," she says. "She is going to bed reading. She says, 'Mom, can I please keep reading? Please?'"

When Dayna's tutor lent her a book about Irlen syndrome, called "Reading by the Colors," Bowman felt a flash of recognition. "I was reading about myself," she says. A hairdresser, she had decided to

forgo college because she doubted she could keep up with the coursework. "Reading was labored and difficult for me," Bowman says. "My brain would shut off, and I'd fall asleep."

Together with a now-retired social worker from the Bourne school system, Julie Sacchetti, Bowman founded a local company called the Irlen Connection, which refers children and adults to testing for Irlen syndrome. The main purpose of the Irlen Connection is to raise awareness about the perceptual problem, which is not picked up by regular special education testing or physicians, Bowman says. She and Sacchetti are lobbying the Legislature to include testing for Irlen syndrome in the normal battery of special education tests. While House Bill 539 initially would require an outlay of approximately \$838,250 to train testers in screening methods, it would save the special education system millions of dollars, the women say.

Irlen syndrome is named after Helen Irlen, the educational psychologist who discovered the condition while working with adult learners in California in the early 1980s. Irlen found that some students' reading improved when they covered a page of print with a colored overlay. Bowman and Sacchetti say cases of Irlen syndrome often are misdiagnosed as attention-deficit disorder or other issues that can require costly educational interventions. Once Irlen syndrome is diagnosed, the only cost is for colored transparencies and glasses. Saba, the Irlen expert, estimates that after 12 months of Irlen testing, 1,000 students would be able to be pulled off Individual Education Plans for a savings of about \$6.7 million. Massachusetts Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll has called the 45-minute Irlen screening method "very efficient and economical." Arizona has passed a bill for a pilot project, and California has a pilot project for its prison population, Bowman says.

Representatives in the Massachusetts House are scheduled to vote on the testing bill by the end of the month. Bowman is optimistic the bill will get passed this time, even though similar legislation has languished in the Statehouse for years. She predicts that Irlen screening would boost MCAS scores, as students bone up on reading. Bowman can't even put a price tag on how much emotional pain can be deflected by screening for Irlen syndrome. "My daughter used to cry and say no one understands," she says. "We have to help these kids in elementary school. There's nothing wrong with their intelligence."

Individuals with Irlen syndrome may:

- **Lose their place on the page easily.**
- **Skip words, lines or reread words or lines.**
- **Squint, open their eyes wide, rub their eyes or have red and watery eyes.**
- **Be able to see only a small portion of the page in focus. The rest may be blurry.**
- **Move around or move the book to get it to focus.**
- **Display a short attention span because of eye strain or fatigue while reading.**
- **Experience nausea because of movement on the page.**
- **Get a headache after reading for a while.**
- **Shade the page or move it to avoid glare.**
- **Be fidgety or restless while reading.**
- **Prefer to read in a dim light.**
- **Make errors when copying from the board.**
- **Misalign numbers in math problems.**
- **Have slow and choppy reading.**
- **Be Unable to stay on task.**
- **Be an underachiever**

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