

Lauren 00:17

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. Today, we sat down with Mark Halpert of 3D Learner to discuss helping students to reach reading success by third grade.

Kristina Scott 00:34

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Mark Halpert out of 3D Learner. Mark is an advocate and regularly partners with school-based and outside professionals to promote reading success. He is also the co-author of two books, Success by Third grade, and From Stress to Success for the Frustrated Parent. Thank you for joining me, Mark.

Mark Halpert 00:52

Pleasure to be here.

Kristina Scott 00:54

So you do a lot of work on success for students with LD grades K through 3. Can you tell me about that work?

Mark Halpert 01:00

Sure. Back in 1973, I was in Los Angeles and my boss wanted me in Phoenix the following Tuesday after Labor Day. And I said I appreciate you're flying me back. But I'd rather go to Vegas for the weekend. So I got to Vegas, and saw that Elvis Presley was in town and called to see if there's one ticket available, because I didn't know anybody in town. And the lady said, You're the luckiest guy alive. He just opened up a three o'clock in the morning show. I said, How many tickets can I buy? She said 10. So I bought 10. And had some could make some money. But one of the guys I met was the head of the Boy Scouts of Israel. And I said to him, for you, it's just regular price, not making any money. I just like you to share the one tip you can share that based on your history of being so successful, especially with immigrants. What did you do? He said, we invested with kids in third grade before. So they were successful by that point. Because when you're successful with kids that they have an unlimited future, and your investment pays back tenfold. Interesting. And that's stuck with me. And it's actually virtually everything I've experienced since then, is consistent with that belief structure.

Kristina Scott 02:15

So what have you been learning about academics, because I know you do a lot with reading, about that K through 3 range for reading.

Mark Halpert 02:25

Well it's fascinating. We have a staggering number, which John King at the LDA Conference talked about, which is 85% of the kids with learning disabilities are reading below basic level. In fourth grade, on the date, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And in Florida 80% of the kids are below grade level, kids with LD, in third grade, and half of them are at risk for grade retention. So we do a terrible job of identifying kids and actually helping the kids succeed.

Mark Halpert 02:58

Conversely, what we've learned is, when you identify the problem, and put together a comprehensive solution, maybe 80-90% of the kids actually have the potential to succeed. So we can do a ton better if you combine parents, schools and outside professionals. So how do you combine them to do better? So in our work, it turns out probably 80% of the kids with learning disabilities also learn differently. They're visual experiential learners who learn best when they see and experience it. They often have attention issues, they often have eye teaming issues where they skip words and lines when reading, they have often have anxiety challenges. And what these kids have is they have a problem with sight words, they have vocabulary, they have a problem with word recognition, with the eye teaming, with the attention. And they're not taught how to visualize what words mean. So in our practice, we actually work on those items. But with the schools, it's all about how do you, first of all, get parents to recognize that schools aren't necessarily proactive. For instance, Tim Kegs, a member of my task team, he's incredibly proactive up in Flagler County in identifying kids early. Some other people I've met at the conference have districts that are incredibly incompetent at identifying kids who actually don't want to. So it's really up to a parent to be informed, empowered, proactive, to actually start graphing your kids reading level, and graphic versus grade level.

Mark Halpert 04:39

As one mom said to me, when I did that, I realized, oh my god, it happened this morning. A parent said to me, my kid's reading is good, her comprehension is at the first percentile. So the school was talking about how good at reading she is. And somebody asked me it is important to be able to read fluently or to understand what you're reading, the answer is yes, yes to both. Absolutely. They go hand in hand, and when a kid who's visual learns how to visualize what they're reading and start creating videos for what they're reading, they can learn to love reading. Whereas this one kid said to me before, it was kind of like going to the dentist's office without Novocaine. Painful. And they become creative, they're creative avoiders.

Kristina Scott 05:31

And it's something that all of our kids in schools experience on a day to day basis. And if you have this fear of going, I have a fear of going to the dentist. But if you have a fear of going to each subject that you're asked to read in, you basically want to shut down.

Mark Halpert 05:45

The studies have shown, well, it's a couple of things the study shows, the avid reader reads 10 times more than the reading avoidance kid. So if you do anything 10 times more, you're gonna get a lot better. But if you read it only 10% as much as another kid, and you start off behind, you're gonna actually spiral further and further behind. So we've seen kids fail third grade with a 135 IQ, who's comprehension is at the first grade third month level. So the system is basically failing our kids. And so our belief at LDA, as well as 3D Learner, we want to train parents to be informed, empowered, proactive. We're strong believers in collaboration, but it's collaboration with a strong focus on success. And so we teach parents when they get into an RTI meeting and somebody says to them, we need eight measurements, so we usually take a measurement every two weeks, so it'll take 16 weeks. And I'll say you could take a measurement every week. They said absolutely, let's do it in eight weeks. Or they'll say we don't evaluate a child until the end of the RTI process. And I brought that up to Melody Musgrove, who was director of OSEP at the time, at a meeting in Washington once and she said, did

you get my memo, and she wrote it about November of 2011. It's a letter that I've read 1000 times, it clearly says RTI, or Response to Intervention cannot be used to delay or deny evaluation.

Mark Halpert 05:46

So you have to give parents these tools to say, they don't always tell you the truth. And you can actually give them a letter to evaluate. And somehow miraculously, the RTI process, the evaluation process come together at the same time, and you sit down now and have a qualification meeting whether or not your child qualifies for special education. And actually, we also train parents, your job is to help your kids succeed. The RTI process is not to get identified for special ed, the first goal is to succeed. So if they can actually help your kids succeed in that process, that's great. And I was speaking at a conference with Don Deshler, who's from University of Kansas. Professor Deshler said to me, what are you going to speak about, he says that parents need to be on the RTI bus. And this gentleman who was 70, I think, at the time, poked me in the chest and said, You have to have the guts to say that, Mark. And I did and I moved the needle from 32% of the people in the room who believed that before my presentation to 70%, after the presentation.

Kristina Scott 08:31

What do you mean by being on the RTI bus?

Mark Halpert 08:34

They should be sitting in meetings and participating and reviewing the results. That doesn't happen in every district. It doesn't happen in most districts. So yes, appearance where's the person? Where's my kid? I don't know. He's in RTI. What's RTI? I don't know. It's a process. I think they now call it MTSS. I'm not even sure what that is either. I think it depends on the state, I think it's used interchangeably as well. It is a multi-tiered system of support versus Response to Intervention. And in special education, we use so many acronyms that no wonder parents are confused. And our goal is part of this initiative. So we had a drive recently, we're trying to figure out how to get new members. And I suggested we have a success for students with LD grades K to three initiative.

Mark Halpert 09:19

And the board's gonna do that. So what we're putting together a whole process later this year, in 2020, we're gonna be rolling out a series of webinars on how does a parent deal with the RTI process? How do they get the right evaluation? How do they develop a proficiency driven IEP? How do they deal with procedural legal issues with a collaborative process that's focused on student success and not accepting the same old answers that says we don't do it this way? Because I've had, especially people tell me, well, we don't set a goal for more than a year, year's gain in a year. And I said that "how do you expect this child's get back to grade level?" That is the goal, isn't it? Yeah. The principal said that we should set the goal for a year and a half. Because in two years, we'd get that child back to grade level. And then the principal said, but with the level of services we're providing, that child won't ever get there. I said, right? What kind of services do you think the child needs to get there? So we doubled the level of services, and the kids started making much more progress. So it's that iterative process that says, first, the parents need to graph their kids' performance on both reading fluency and comprehension versus grade level.

Kristina Scott 10:39

So how do parents know what grade level is?

Mark Halpert 10:43

That's what we're going to be providing, we're going to be providing a sheet that shows this is where grade level is, and then you can graph where your child's at. And she'll very often see that gap widening. And when you go into a meeting, as I often do with clients, where you show the issue, and the gap widening, all of a sudden, the schools got a different perspective. Because I've literally seen a place where the kid went from the first grade, the first grade level to the first grade five month level to the second grade level over two years, making a one year level, but they used a chart, a legend that made it look like the kids were really performing. But when you lay it in the grade level performance slope, and the fact that that gap was widening, from one year to two years, all of a sudden...

Kristina Scott 11:32

You have a different story to tell.

Mark Halpert 11:34

And you got a whole different conversation. And now you're talking, how do I get this kid successful by third grade, and I never met a parent that didn't want to achieve it. And actually schools like it too. Because all of a sudden, from my perspective, we actually have when parents do an IEP with us, they fill out a section of what they're going to do to help their kids succeed.

Kristina Scott 11:58

The partnership and the success process, it doesn't just fall on the schools now.

Mark Halpert 12:02

Not only does it just fall, we'd like to think of it this way, if both sides commit 110%, the kids chances probably triple or quadruple being successful.

Kristina Scott 12:14

Because students are getting to see that their parents value school, as well as the school is now working in collaboration with the parents. So there's actually a relationship that the students can see and begin to value.

Mark Halpert 12:26

And now if you think about this way, let's say we're really successful, and you take the percentage, let's say in Florida, right now, it's only 20% of the kids were successful. If 40% of the kids were successful by third grade, you don't have all those costs that go on for years and years and years.

Kristina Scott 12:41

The cost of special education services or the cost of what?

Mark Halpert 12:44

Having a kid in remedial reading for all those years, okay? And if you look at it, and one of the members, a psychologist once said to me, you realize that if you significantly increase the success of kids, the percentage of kids successful by third grade, you probably cut in half our mental health issues in this country.

Kristina Scott 13:05

Because lack of progress in academics has social concerns as well, and which leads to anxiety, depression and other areas.

Mark Halpert 13:14

And we've seen kids who are in sixth grade, they're four years behind, who do you think they're in class with? Now all of a sudden, if they get to grade level, they're in classes with their peers, they're with the high achievers, they're trying to perform. So we could save money on every single element. And what's really important to me is, these are the visual learners who can change the world, they can become engineers, entrepreneurs, because these are the visual experiential learners that have the skills to solve problems nobody else has to be very creative, and to be very successful in life, or them the prison system through the school to prison pipeline, and really a smart choice. The kid doesn't actually get a choice at eight years, or seven or eight years old to make that choice which path we put them on. But if you can put a lot of kids on the pathway to success, we put our country's number one resource in the priority that it deserves. It's our kids.

Kristina Scott 14:15

And it sounds like K through 3 is the spot that it sets the path for...

Mark Halpert 14:20

There's a study that we're sitting here on February 18th, or 19th. It's study just came out this week that said, with 80% confidence, you could predict in third grade where a kid's going to be in 10th. Longitudinal study done. There are studies that show that kids not on grade level in third grade, they're four times more likely to drop out, if a kid's poor it's six times more likely to drop out. I have no idea and I've sat in the commissioner's office in Florida and I've sat in OS EP office, offices of federal education programs in DC haven't gotten much reaction, but I will say this, LDA has taken this on, we're going to try to make this initiative where we help make the difference for not only individual kids, but collectively through, we're going to come up with some policy statements, we're going to be doing a lot of things. And if anybody has any ideas on this, they can email me at markhalperldafl@gmail.com, I want to hear people say this, we don't have all the answers by any stretch of the imagination. And there are people gonna be listening to this podcast and says, Mark, have you ever thought about x and y? And I'm gonna guarantee you that I've heard of some and not heard of many. So we really want professionals and parents who've got ideas that said, Have you thought about this and thought about that? This is not a one person initiative, or even our task team of five, this is everybody working together to significantly increase the percentage of students with LD who are successful by third grade, or sooner.

Kristina Scott 15:57

So it sounds like there's a call for action. In order to get policy really pushed forward on this.

Kristina Scott 16:03

Yeah. Because if they're fighting for their kids, they're fighting for all kids it sounds like, and if we start separating out learning disabilities by specific type, or being exclusionary of other types, we're not inclusive of moving our entire population of young children forward.

Mark Halpert 16:03

We're gonna push the policy and we're going to have a third grade retention. We're gonna have a policy paper for the policy, or a position paper for the policy people, we're also going to have a principal's paper for parents. What is it we want, we want to promote parents. And we want to take this around the country and talk to parent groups in LDA, and outside of LDA, to find ways of igniting a movement, not just about one condition, because these kids often they might have dyslexia, but they also got vision issues, they also have attention issues. But if you focus on success, then you look at the whole kid, rather than one condition. I think phonics, for instance, is really important. But so is vision, visual processing, so is auditory processing, so is working memory, so is processing speed, so is reducing anxiety. So it's teaching parents. We've taught parents how to be the coach and advocate their kid needs, we should be teaching every parent how to be the coach and advocate their child needs.

Mark Halpert 17:16

And I admire one of my colleagues who started to help start Decoding Dyslexia, great group trying to do the right things. But when you look at the whole kid, and you deal with math, and you deal with writing, and you deal with reading, because too often, I've had people who tell me reading fluency is the answer. But I had a kid who's in 10th grade, reading at the ninth grade level. And the person said, the two correlate, reading comprehension and reading fluency. And I said, I had the answer in my back pocket, so I wasn't making...I knew what I was talking about. I said, let's have the psychologists test the kid for reading comprehension. Now, the case may be when he came to us two months earlier, he was reading at the second grade level. By the time they tested him, he's up to fourth grade level. But they were shocked that he was five grade levels behind the fluency level, when in fact if they tested him earlier in the year it would be seventh grade levels below. So reading fluency and reading comprehension may correlate in some broad sense, I really don't care, because it's about the individual kid. It doesn't take much more to assess reading comprehension and reading fluency. Ya have to do both. Because reading fluency, I'm Jewish by birth, and by the way I lead my life, I could read Hebrew and actually impress somebody. But I have no idea what I'm reading. And I asked Sally Shaywitz that question, and she said, Well, that's only true in Hebrew. And that's not true. I mean, the truth of the matter is, we owe it to our kids to do three things in that respect. Make them fluent readers, make them grade level and comprehension, and get them to love learning.

Kristina Scott 18:59

And I think that last piece is super important, because that's what can continue on, that lifelong learners are the ones that always want to be engaging in something new because of discovery and an opportunity.

Mark Halpert 19:13

Because most of them are going to be working in fields that don't exist right now. So they need to become lifelong learners. And they need to know how to learn. And so if you do that trifecta of fluency, comprehension, and love for learning, what do you think happens to self esteem?

Kristina Scott 19:29

Oh, it goes through the roof. I bet it goes through the roof.

Mark Halpert 19:31

Yeah. And so in our whole practice, it's about all those pieces. It's about helping kids be successful. I'd like LDA to be a leader in forging that forward so that we help many, many more kids succeed with a policy that's focused on the whole child.

Kristina Scott 19:48

And that's why it seems like we should be focusing on the holistic view of the child, not just individual subject matters or even sub-subject matters within that content area. So if people want more information, where should they go to get more information on this topic or to get to move the needle forward?

Mark Halpert 20:08

Okay, so a couple of things. One, they can get ahold of me at 561-361-7495. I'll talk to anybody who's got something to say, this is a passion, okay? Okay. And if they email me at markhalpertldafl@gmail.com I'll respond, and then look out for the webinars that are going to be coming out later this summer, or spring or summer on success for students with LD grades K to 3. And if your state wants to get involved, great, because we're, we're trying to make this a nationwide movement. And if not, we had some people in meeting today from Canada and from Bermuda. We don't have to limit this United States even we can help kids worldwide succeed.

Kristina Scott 20:59

Great. It sounds like this is a real passion of yours. So thank you for taking this initiative on and moving the needle forward for all of our students in education.

Mark Halpert 21:09

And thank you for doing this.

Kristina Scott 21:11

Thanks, Mark.

Lauren 21:13

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. The series was made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. This is a wrap on our first season of the LDA podcast. But we're excited to continue to bring you more information and advice from experts. So our next season is already in the works. Stay tuned for updates on our upcoming season which will be posted across LDA social media channels. And as always, for more information, support and resources, visit ldaamerica.org