



## 8th-Grader Gets \$87,000 for Dyslexia Study

An eighth-grader frustrated with his little brother's reading difficulties put his shoulder to the wheel and scored an educational coup: an \$87,000 grant to screen kindergarteners for dyslexia.

It began in the fall of 1999, when Matt Miller, then 13 and attending school in Monterey, Calif., was asked to write a mock grant proposal for a scientific study in English class. He chose dyslexia, a subject close to home. His younger brother, Andrew, suffers from dyslexia, but wasn't diagnosed for years.

"It really annoyed [Matt] that Andrew had been in a mainstream learning environment until he was in fifth grade, and his dyslexia had not been identified," said the boys' mother, Cynthia Miller. "He said, 'There's got to be a better way.'"

Matt said he decided to study dyslexia because he saw how much his brother "was struggling in school, and how frustrating it was for him — I was curious to learn more about it."

Matt logged onto the Internet, learned the finer points of phonemes, digraphs and consonant blends, sought out researchers and eventually wrote his own three-year plan. In it, he proposed to screen kindergartners at risk for signs of reading problems and similar learning disabilities.

"The earliest they can be tested is the best, because it gives more time for remediation — and it's more likely that they'll be able to be helped," he said.

### A Moving Proposal

Matt's proposal caught the eye of teachers at the Chartwell School, which Andrew attended. The school specializes in helping students with learning or reading difficulties. He also attracted the attention of local special education teachers, and with their help Matt pitched the plan to the school district in Pacific Grove, Calif.

"When he presented it to me, I was moved — both emotionally and by the quality of his research," said Jack Marchi, superintendent of the 2,200-student school system.

Marchi's reply: Find the funding and try it out.

After more research — this time on philanthropic foundations — Matt applied to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in Los Altos, Calif., which last December awarded him \$87,300. Chartwell, which will administer the program, announced the grant last week.

Experts estimate that between 5 percent and 15 percent of Americans have some degree of dyslexia, which involves a brain structure that makes it difficult for a learning reader to connect verbal sounds with the letters or symbols that "spell" that sound. Such connections are essential to learn to read.

A study published earlier this month in the journal *Science* found that as English-speaking children with dyslexia begin to read, they face an awesome task, requiring them to learn more than 1,100 ways that written letters are used to symbolize 40 sounds. It may explain why there are twice as many identified dyslexics in English-speaking cultures as in countries with less complex languages, such as France and Italy.

### A Teen's Success Where Adults Failed

Under Matt's proposal, 180 kindergarteners in two



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Pacific Grove schools will be tested in September for their ability to understand sounds within words. If the 15-minute screening shows they've got difficulties, they'll be given special instruction to help them hear and understand how the sounds translate into words on a printed page.

Students will be tested three times a year for three years, until they're in second grade.

His family recently moved to Fairfield, Conn., but Matt, now 15 and a ninth-grader, said he'll try to get out to California from time to time to observe the program.

Marchi said he looks forward to seeing the results, and hopes the project inspires Matt to get into teaching — he certainly has a touch for writing grant proposals.

"We've been applying for grants from the Packard Foundation for years and never received one," Marchi said. "This kid had the magic."



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