

PRIVATE, PUBLIC, AND NONPROFIT SECTORS: Creating Learning Allies

By Rebecca Arno

Katrina is an enthusiastic young woman, positive about her future. She dreams of becoming a pastry chef someday. A junior at South High School in Denver, she loves her classes and enjoys mentoring younger students when they need help. But Katrina's path hasn't always been an easy one.

"I think we found out in first grade I had a learning difference," she recalls. She spent some time in special education classes and when she came to South as a freshman, she had what is called an "IEP" – an Individualized Education Plan – that acknowledged her challenges. Reading was always a struggle. "My mom had to read everything out loud to me. That could be really hard when she came home after a long day at work and was tired, and I was tired, but we did it. Then I found out about Learning Ally ... and all that changed."

Learning Ally, founded in 1948 as Recording for the Blind, has evolved over the past 66 years to serve a broad variety of people with learning disabilities, including dyslexia. Today, Learning Ally provides an array of educational solutions designed to meet the needs of students, parents, and educators. One of its programs provides digitally produced audiobook services for students in Denver Public Schools (DPS), and one of the first schools to receive services was South High.

"I just download the books onto my iPod and listen to them whenever I need to study," Katrina explains. "They have every textbook there is, and lots of other books too. I never thought I'd read for fun, but Learning Ally has helped me explore the world of books." Learning Ally provides the largest online library of its kind in the world, containing more than 80,000 human-narrated audio textbooks and literature titles.

Katrina's teacher, Allison Mitchell, has been at South for five years, now, as a Resource English teacher. She is grateful for the resources offered by Learning Ally – both the materials themselves and the training support for teachers. "Learning Ally gives students the courage to access parts of the curriculum that otherwise would be difficult for them. I have students who would never have been able to consider an honors or AP class, who are now doing so with great success."

The reason Learning Ally is available to all of the students in DPS is through the generous support of an anonymous donor through The Denver Foundation. A grant of \$500,000 will fund the program for two years to support kids who have reading-based learning disabilities, of this population 80% are dyslexic. This creative connection between a nonprofit, a passionate donor, and a public school system will have dramatic results for students like Katrina.

"When students, parents, and educators have the proper tools and support, they can overcome the obstacles presented by a disability," says Terrie Noland, National Director of Educational Programs for Learning Ally. "Over the next two years, our local staff will work with parents and educators to identify their needs and develop and deliver comprehensive support plans that will benefit student learning."

In addition to collaborating with DPS educators, Learning Ally will help support



Katrina and her teacher, Alison Mitchell, at South High School

parents of struggling readers in the Denver area. Through online gatherings, interactive training webinars, parent-to-parent networks, and collaborative engagement with community parent groups, they plan to help parents work together to access the tools and resources they need to support their children.

Learning Ally is connecting Denver with a movement in states across the country to help students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. New Jersey passed a law in January to mandate testing in second grade for all public school children who show signs of learning disabilities, and to give professional development to teachers to help them understand what dyslexia is and to connect them with services. "Early intervention like this can do so much to help kids," says Terrie. "Imagine how much it could have helped Katrina and her mom to know about Learning Ally back in grade school."

Working together, the Denver Public Schools and Learning Ally will help students with learning differences, like Katrina, to become more confident, resilient learners able to achieve their full potential. For more information, visit learningally.org/dps.