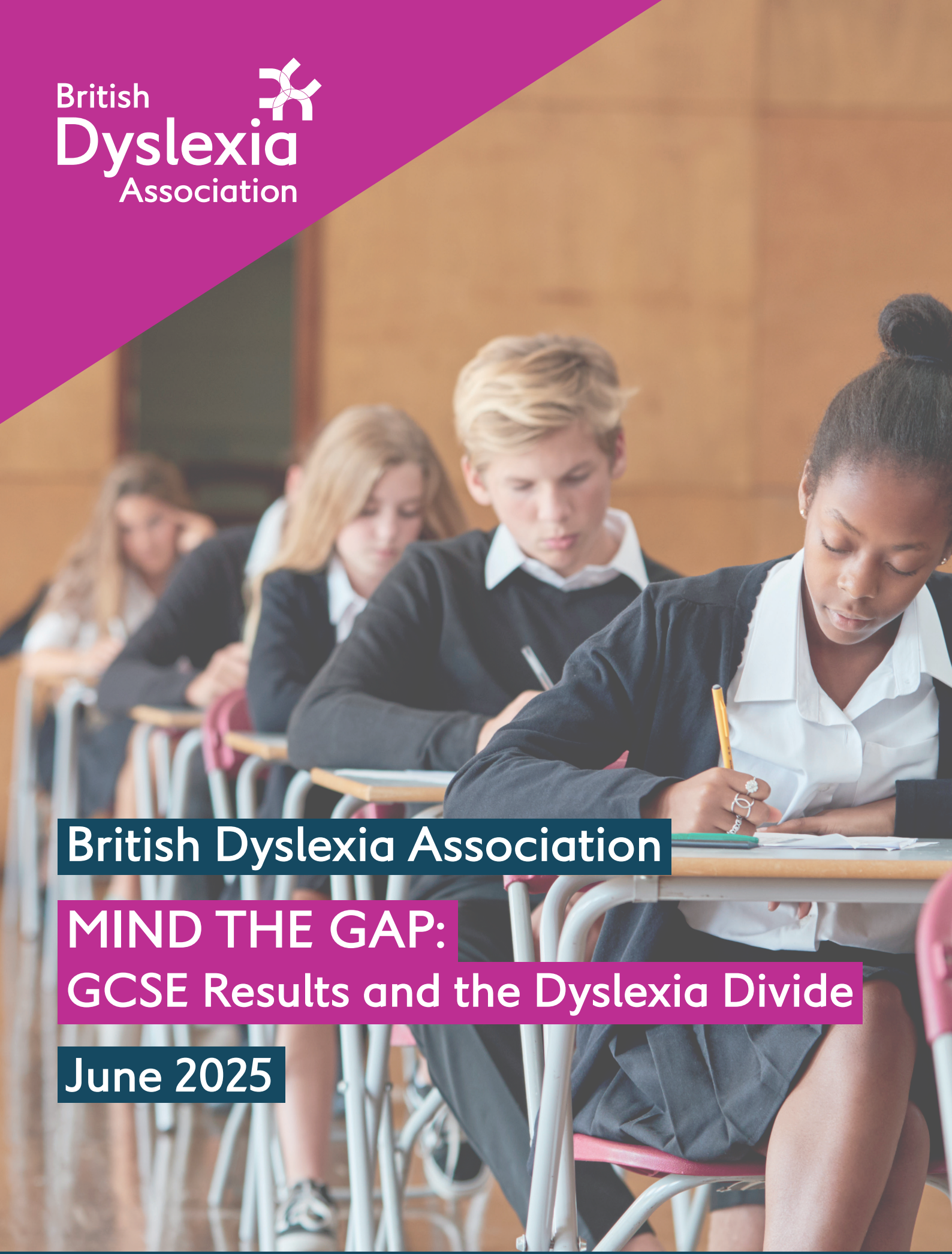
British Dyslexia Association



British Dyslexia Association

MIND THE GAP:
GCSE Results and the Dyslexia Divide

June 2025

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Introduction

Many young dyslexic people face extra challenges in school, especially when it comes to reading, writing, and spelling. These skills are key parts of almost every GCSE subject, which can make exams more difficult for dyslexic young people.

This report looks at how dyslexic young people perform at GCSE level compared to those who have no identified special educational need (SEN). And although schools and exam boards offer some support, dyslexic young people still tend to get lower GCSE results on average than their peers who don't have dyslexia. We know this can affect their confidence, impact their self-esteem and limit their choices for further education or training.

By understanding the problem more clearly, we can take steps to make sure all young people – no matter how they learn – have a fair chance to succeed.

Background

Dyslexia is a common specific learning difference that mainly affects reading, writing, and spelling. It can also impact how someone remembers instructions or organises their work. It is not linked to intelligence, and many dyslexic people have strengths in creativity, problem-solving, and thinking in new ways. Around 10% of the UK population is thought to be dyslexic.

Dyslexia often becomes more noticeable as children get older and schoolwork becomes more demanding. Without the right support, dyslexic young people can struggle to access the curriculum and so they fall behind, especially when it comes to written work and exams.

GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are the main qualifications taken by young people in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They are mostly assessed through written exams, which require strong reading and writing skills and focus on the ability to recall information at speed,– areas that many dyslexic students find difficult. In addition, GCSE exams also test and allocate marks for the correct use of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) in subjects not directly testing English Language. This means that many dyslexic students fail to achieve the top GCSE grades because they are unable to get the marks allocated to SPaG, even though they may have demonstrated the subject knowledge required to do so.

While some support is available in the form of exam access arrangements – such as extra time or a reader – not all students get the help they need. Some are not formally diagnosed in time; others may not receive the adjustments that would make exams fairer, and most struggle to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a formal timed examination that does not play to their strengths, as dyslexic individuals have a comparative weakness in written ability compared to their overall ability.

What did we find?

The Department for Education reports performance of pupils in state funded schools in England at the end of Key Stage 4 – showing their attainment in English and Maths GCSE.

Table 1 shows a comparison of those pupils with a recorded Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) such as dyslexia, against those pupils who have no recorded Special Educational Need (SEN).

In the last academic year (2023/24) over half of pupils with no recorded SEN achieved a grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE, compared to just over 1 in 5 (21.6%) of pupils with a SpLD such as dyslexia. This is an attainment gap of 30.3 percentage points.

Table 1: Percentage of pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSEs

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% pupils without SEN	47.7	48.3	48.2	55.8	58.0	55.8	51.0	51.9
% pupils with SpLD	16.9	18.2	18.1	21.4	24.1	23.4	21.1	21.6

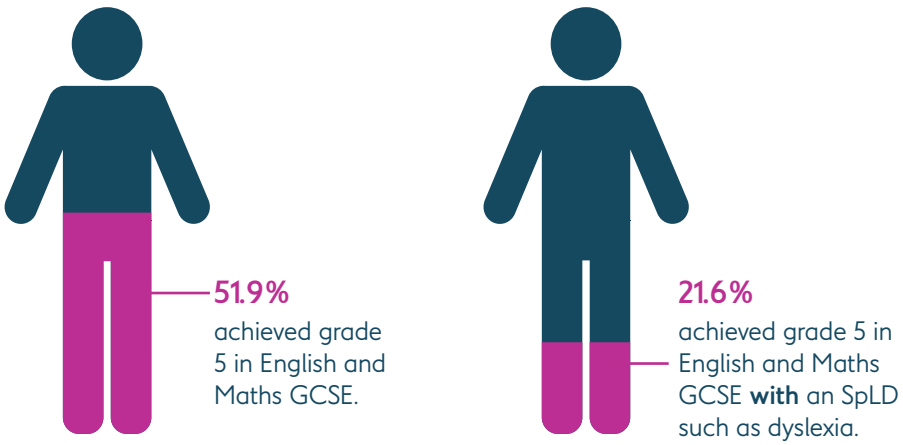


Table 2 also shows that only 39.5% of pupils with a SpLD achieved a pass grade (4) in GCSE English and maths in 2023/24. This is significantly lower than the 72.3% of pupils without a recorded SEN; an attainment gap of 32.8 percentage points.

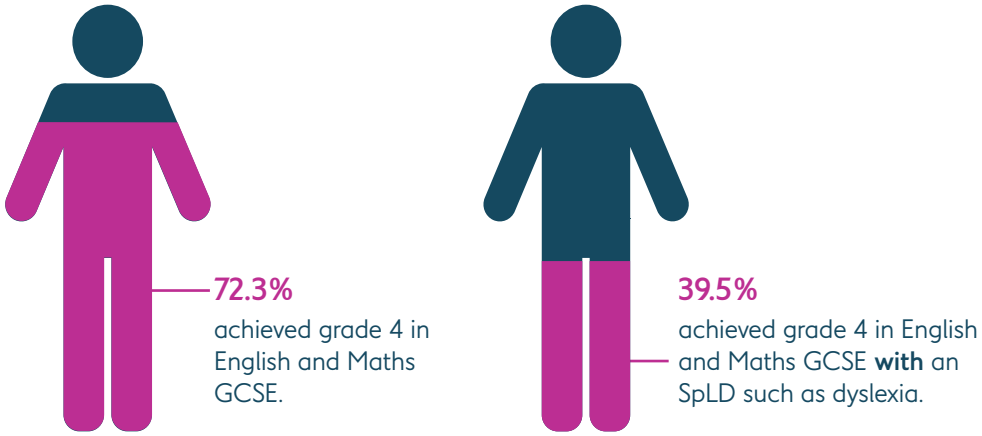


Table 2: Percentage of pupils achieving grade 4(pass) or above in English and Maths GCSEs

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% pupils without-SEN	70.4	70.6	71.0	78.0	79.0	75.8	72.1	72.3
% pupils with SpLD	33.5	35.0	35.6	43.2	46.0	41.9	38.9	39.5

Why do children and young people with dyslexia do worse than their peers?

These findings show a clear and concerning pattern: dyslexic young people achieve lower GCSE results than their peers in these two core subjects– and this gap is widening.

Our analysis shows that this performance gap is not about ability; dyslexia is not linked to intelligence and occurs across the range of abilities, – it is shaped by the way we identify, assess and support dyslexic students. Early identification and a more inclusive and flexible approach, both in teaching and assessment, is needed to ensure all young people are given a fair chance.

Exams and assessments

GCSEs rely heavily on written exams, which can be particularly difficult for students with dyslexia. The time pressure, dense text, and expectation for long written answers all present barriers. Even with access arrangements like extra time, or the use of a word processor (laptop) the exams still favour good memory recall, quick and fluent reading and writing and correct spelling, punctuation and grammar – areas where many dyslexic students struggle.

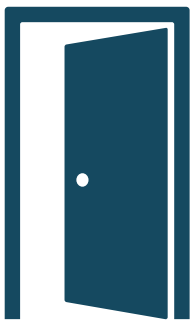
"It was clear I had the same knowledge, if not more than many of my mates, yet in a final exam environment I never finished within the allotted time and other students were beating me by up to 20%." **Ross**

Dyslexic young people often have strengths in creative thinking, problem-solving, and practical work. These talents are sought after in the workplace but may not be fully recognised through traditional exams. This mismatch means that many students leave school with grades that do not reflect their true potential, and employers can struggle to identify those who may have the best skills match for the workplace

" I left school with 1 GCSE… my family and friends believed I was stupid because of my limited qualifications." **Tara**

Lack of identification and diagnosis

Some young people are not diagnosed until secondary school, and we know that 80% of dyslexic pupils leave school without ever receiving a diagnosis. This leads to many young people struggling with low confidence and self-esteem, gaps in learning, and anxiety around exams.



80%
of dyslexic pupils leave school without diagnosis

"I always considered myself as "slow and stupid". I didn't get great grades in my exams and I thought that was just the way my life was going to be. " **Michael**

Inadequate support

We know that support for dyslexic young people varies widely between schools. Some benefit from early identification and targeted help, while the majority are undiagnosed or receive limited support, meaning they are not able to fulfil their potential.

"School was never easy for me. I was the kind of student who struggled with reading, writing, and traditional learning methods. I often felt out of place. I found ways to adapt and move forward, even though I always felt there was something a bit different about the way I processed information. " **Suzy**

Teacher training

Not all teachers feel confident in how to support young people with dyslexia, especially in subjects outside English. While many work hard to help, a lack of training can mean that classroom strategies are not always inclusive or effective.

"I was diagnosed when I was 13. None of my teachers noticed because I was not massively behind my peers, but I was putting in far more work to attain the same grades." **Michael**

"My primary school teacher was the first to notice that I was having difficulties with reading and spelling. She informed my family about her concerns, and that was when the challenges I faced were initially recognised. " **James**

Impact on young people

Failing GCSE English and maths can have far reaching implications, not just on self-esteem and confidence of the young person. It can also be a barrier to pursuing a chosen study or vocational pathway when they leave school. Most level 3 qualifications such as A Levels, T levels, vocational courses and apprenticeships require a pass in English and maths GCSE as part of their entry requirement. Many employers routinely ask for English and maths GCSE as a standard part of their recruitment irrespective of the requirements of the role they are recruiting into.

"I managed to pass English GCSE the second time, but the best I've done in maths is a Grade 3 and I've done resits four times. I wanted to do Early years Level 3 but I need to pass maths to get on the course." **Emily**

How do we improve this situation?

To close the gap in GCSE performance between dyslexic young people and their peers, changes are needed at multiple levels of the education system. The following recommendations are based on the findings in this report and are aimed at schools, exam boards, and policymakers:

Recommendations

Making children with dyslexia a priority

To ensure children and young people with dyslexia become a priority and are no longer overlooked, the Department for Education must:

- Commit to publishing a National Dyslexia Strategy.
- Appoint a named lead for dyslexia in the Department.
- Commit to including a specific flag for children with dyslexia in SEN and Key Stage attainment data.

Early identification and support

To ensure early and consistent identification of dyslexia, and to end inequalities in access to support, the Department for Education should:

- Develop a universal pathway for identification, assessment and support.
- Review the use of the Year 1 Phonics Check to ensure it is fit-for-purpose.
- Develop and roll-out a simple, free/low cost and teacher-led screening tool for Key Stages 1 and 2.

Creating 'dyslexia-friendly' classrooms

To ensure all classrooms provide inclusive and effective 'dyslexia-friendly' learning environments, the Department for Education should:

- Establish SEN support, on a statutory footing.
- Ensure Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework reflect evidence-based strategies for supporting dyslexic learners and insert minimum requirements of teaching time.
- Provide clear guidance for training providers on how to support teachers' ongoing professional development in identifying dyslexia and using dyslexia-friendly teaching methods.

Widen the scope of the curriculum and assessment at key stage 4
To ensure that the national curriculum meets the needs of all learners, the Department for Education should:

- Introduce explicit teaching of assistive technology in Key Stage 2 to help reading and spelling.
- Provide vocational and functional qualification pathways alongside GCSEs.
- Ensure GCSE assessment techniques better reflect the needs and skills of all learners.
- Remove SPaG marks in GCSE exams not testing English Language or enable learners to use assistive technology to gain these marks.

By taking these steps, we can help build a more equal and inclusive education system where all young people, including dyslexic young people, have the chance to succeed.

Conclusion

The GCSE performance gap for dyslexic young people is not just a statistic – it's a signal that our education system is not working for everyone. Too many bright, capable learners are being held back, not because they lack potential, but because the way we assess success doesn't reflect how they learn best.

Dyslexic young people face real challenges with reading and writing – but they also bring unique strengths: creative thinking, problem-solving, resilience, and imagination. These talents too often go unrecognised in an exam system that prizes speed and written accuracy above all else.

This report shows that with earlier identification, better classroom support, and fairer assessment, we can close the gap. We can help dyslexic young people to not just survive school, but to thrive in it.

Change is possible – and it's urgently needed. No young person should leave school feeling like their grades define their worth or their future. It's time to build an education system that reflects the full range of human ability – one where every learner, including all dyslexic learners, is supported, understood, and given the chance to succeed.

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