



## PRESS RELEASE

### NIAGARA FALLS TO HOST SCREENING OF THE DOCUMENTARY *LEFT BEHIND*

***Event Will be Hosted by Niagara Falls Mayor Robert M. Restaino and the Niagara Falls Public Library as Part of the WNY Literacy Initiative***

**Buffalo, May 29, 2025** – The WNY Education Alliance is pleased to announce that Niagara Falls Mayor Robert M. Restaino, the Niagara Falls Public Library, and the other partners in the WNY Literacy Initiative will be hosting a screening of the award-winning documentary, *Left Behind*, on Wednesday, June 4 from 5:30-8:00pm at the Niagara Falls Public Library on 1425 Main Street in Niagara Falls, NY.

*Left Behind* tells the story of a group of mothers determined to open New York City's first public school for dyslexic students. More information about the documentary, including the trailer, can be found at [www.leftbehindthefilm.com](http://www.leftbehindthefilm.com). This will be the first screening of the film in Western New York.

Immediately following the screening, there will be a panel discussion with the director of the film, Anna Toomey, as well as leaders of the Literacy Academy Collective, Emily Hellstrom and Naomi Peña, whose efforts are featured in the documentary.

Members of the Niagara Falls community and WNY region, educators, and the media are all invited to attend for free by registering using the link below.

[www.eventbrite.com/e/film-screening-of-left-behind-tickets-1343332306089](http://www.eventbrite.com/e/film-screening-of-left-behind-tickets-1343332306089)

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About:

### ***Left Behind***

*Left Behind* is the inspiring story of a group of determined moms who band together to create the first public dyslexic school in the largest school district in America, New York City.

Approximately 200,000 New York City public school students are dyslexic, yet there is no public initiative that provides the specialized skill and care necessary for these learners.

Frustrated that they had to remove their own kids from the public school system, a group of determined moms band together to do something that's never been done before – open New York City's first public school for dyslexic students. The journey is not a smooth ride, and they face both institutional and personal hurdles as they try to upend a system.

A new mayoral candidate bolsters their fight after he reveals his own dyslexia. But will they be able to convince a bureaucratic education system to overhaul outdated politics to ensure a brighter future for the city's dyslexic youth?

### ***Anna Toomey, Director Left Behind***

Anna Toomey an Emmy Award-winning producer with 20 years of experience. She has worked for ABC News, *Good Morning America*, ABC News' long-form unit, and *Peter Jennings Reporting*. She creates compelling, character-driven stories with passion and integrity.

Anna's credits include Emmy Award-winning *The Gun Fight*, an inside look at the National Rifle Association, as well as *The American Game*, *The Century* and *The Beatles Anthology*.

As a producer on the six-part series *In the Jury Room*, Anna spent months in the field covering murder trials and combing through hours of footage to develop an intriguing story line, which culminated in a prime time six-hour series aired on ABC News.

Anna won two Daytime Emmy Awards at *Good Morning America*. She directed multiple camera shoots, including a roundtable discussion with Robin Roberts and Sheryl Sandberg for her book *Lean In*. She also produced a series of breast cancer awareness segments, including ABC News Correspondent Amy Robach's emotional journey after her diagnosis.

Anna lives in New York with her husband and two children. She owns her own production company, Sandy Dog Productions.

### ***Emily Hellstrom, Director of External Affairs & Strategy Literacy Academy Collective***

Emily leads External Affairs and Strategy for LAC. Emily is a community activist and parent of a child with dyslexia. She is the former Vice President of the CEC for District 2 founding the Students with Disabilities Committee which she convened monthly with parents from across the district. She served as PTA president, on the School Leadership Team, and was a pioneer family of a new and incubated D2 school - Peck Slip PS343. As Co-Chair of 75 Morton Community Alliance, Emily organized multiple community focus



groups and envisioning sessions. She has a background in non-profit fundraising serving as the former development director of start-up non-profit Shine Global and finance chair of several state-wide and national political campaigns. She was a working actress in New York City from 1994 to 2004. In 1998 she co-founded the Project 400 Theater Company, co-creating and acting in, among other works, *The Donkey Show* - a hit off-Broadway musical running for 8 years in NYC.

#### **Naomi Peña, Director of Community & Family Engagement Literacy Academy Collective**

Naomi is the Director of Community & Family Engagement. Naomi became involved in educational advocacy work when her oldest child was diagnosed with Dyslexia 17 years ago and given an IEP. She quickly had to learn how to navigate the special education bureaucracy in NYC and experienced first-hand the overwhelming complexity of the system. Through support from organizations, she learned the special education law and lent herself as a support for other special education parents in her community. In 2015 she joined the Community Education Council for School District 1, where she served as President for five of her eight years. As President of the CEC, and as a proud product of NYCHA, she helped develop and implement NYC's first district-wide Diversity in Admissions system, and the first Family Resource Center in District 1. She has a professional background in legal, marketing, operations, and finance.

#### **Literacy Academy Collective**

At Literacy Academy Collective (LAC) we believe access to literacy is the most pressing Civil Rights issue in New York City. Our mission is to build and support a network of NYCPS schools to allow struggling readers achieve academic success by bringing culturally relevant, structured literacy to students at the intersection of race, poverty, and disability.

Our goal is to break the cycle of illiteracy for students with dyslexia, LBLDs, and other struggling readers.

#### **The Path Forward**

Since Fall 2023, with support from the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) and the Hunt Institute, Literacy Academy Collective (LAC) convened the NYS Path Forward team comprised of a Leadership Committee, Steering Committee, and three working groups of 50 members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. As part of the third cohort of The Path Forward initiative, the NYS Path Forward team met regularly to develop the Action Plan. The plan focuses on the role EPPs play in ensuring teacher candidates graduate with the knowledge and skills to teach reading using SoR.

#### **WNY Education Alliance**

The WNY Education Alliance is a non-profit organization committed to improving education in the Western New York area through advocacy, community engagement, and strategic partnerships.

#### **WNY Literacy Initiative**

The WNY Literacy Initiative is a collaborative effort comprised of teachers, parent groups, community organizations, education non-profits, librarians, and literacy experts, including the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Buffalo Mayor Christopher P. Scanlon and the City of Buffalo, the Buffalo NAACP, the Buffalo Police Athletic League, the Buffalo Sabres Foundation, the Buffalo Urban League, the Community Action Organization of WNY, Dyslexia Allies of WNY, Dyslexia Services of WNY, The Education Trust – New York, The Hoekelman Center for Health Beyond Medicine, the Ibero-American Action League, Literacy



Buffalo Niagara, Monkey See, Monkey Do...Children's Bookstore, the Monroe County Library System, the National Parents Union, Neuhaus Education Center, the New York State Network For Youth Success & the Afterschool Network of Western New York, Niagara Falls Mayor Robert M. Restaino and the City of Niagara Falls, the Niagara Falls Public Library, The Niagara Frontier Reading Council, the Parent Network of Western New York, Project FLIGHT, The Reading League, Read to Succeed Buffalo, Say Yes Buffalo, Teach My Kid to Read, Villa Maria College, We the Parents of WNY, WNY Education Alliance, and the WNY Literacy Collaborative.

The mission of the WNY Literacy Initiative is to increase awareness of the importance of literacy and improve literacy rates in Western New York through community outreach, innovative partnerships to address educational gaps, professional development opportunities for local educators, and research and advocacy.

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