

Eden Leavey /
Features Editor: Print

Antonio Reis (25) is part of the 10.7% of the High School community with a physical disability, according to an online survey conducted by The Standard Jan. 16-26 with 131 student and faculty responses. He said his condition was induced by an early birth, affecting his bodily development.

"I was born three months premature, so I was born with extreme hypotonia, which is low muscle tone," Reis said. "Basically, my muscles are floppier than normal, so they get tired more easily, especially in fine motor function."

To combat his hypotonia, Reis said he attended physiotherapy for six years as a child and is still working to overcome difficulties.

Awareness

Reis said because his disability is not particularly visible, many have misconceptions about why he struggles to engage in certain activities, such as writing by hand, until he explains his condition. He said the able-bodied population frequently has fallacies about living with a disability.

"A lot of people assume things about you without knowing what the reality behind it is," Reis said.

When Alexandra Braun (24) went on vacation for winter break in Grade 6, she did not expect to return with a broken leg due to a skiing accident. Braun said the injury landed her in a wheelchair for three months, and the experience of being unable to walk opened her eyes to the day-to-day lives of people with physical disabilities.

"I would be in a wheelchair and little kids would stare at me," Braun said. "I can imagine for someone who's been facing that their entire life, it can get pretty frustrating and overwhelming."

Social Justice Council Co-President Sam Hamilton (23) said SJC aims to shed light on all aspects of social justice and activism.

However, Hamilton said one area of improvement for the council is giving issues pertaining to physical disabilities equal attention. Hamilton said because there is only a small group of individuals with physical disabilities in the High School, there is less prompting SJC members to explore the matter and spread awareness.

"Projects are student-run and based on student interest," Hamilton said. "The lack of students with physical disabilities often, unfortunately, lowers the topic's priority."

Nonetheless, Director of Student Support Belinda Nicholson said more students with physical disabilities attend ASL than one may think, especially in the lower divisions of the school. She said the community is often unaware of this fact because of society's close-minded definition of a physical disability.

"When people think about a physical disability, they have a particular vision in mind," Nicholson said. "They might imagine someone in a wheelchair or somewhere on crutches, and I think it's important to know that not all disabilities are visible."

Action

Nicholson said there is an individualized accessibility action plan created for every student with a physical disability who is accepted to the school. These plans design systems that enable each individual to succeed at the institution despite any physical differences.

"We look ahead at their journey with the school, and we think about what they need to access and how we need to make modifications for that," Nicholson said. "Every summer, we make building changes, as necessary, to make sure that we have accessibility for students."

Nicholson said examples of building modifications include the flickering and brightness of lights, the color and type size of worksheets and the height of bathroom sinks and toilets. She said during the Distance Learning Program, some teachers even wore small microphones at home to ensure students with hearing impairments could understand the instructions.

Furthermore, Braun said navigating the school in a wheelchair after her accident made for fewer challenges than she expected.

"It was pretty accessible," Braun said. "There are ramps throughout the school, so I used them. I used the ramp by the cafeteria to go down to the service elevator, which took me throughout the building."

Still, Braun said the accessibility was not ideal and if the circumstances of her injury were permanent, attending the school would bear additional challenges.

"It wasn't much of a hassle, however, I knew that it would come to an end," Braun said. "If someone is in a permanent disability, it might be harder to navigate the school. The school should put things in place for that person, like going to the bathroom. I didn't go to the bathroom at school because it was too difficult and awkward, and a person had to come with me."

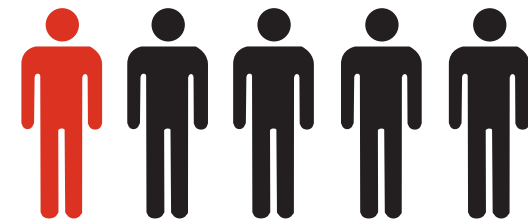
Even so, Reis said in terms of learning support, the Specific Learning Differences program has helped him tremendously to overcome many struggles enhanced by his physical disability. "I only joined the SLD program formally last year, but switching to that, it's been incredible," Reis said. "Especially for tests that would require handwriting, which normally I stress out about a lot, having that extra time allows me to really be putting in my best work."

Curriculum

According to the survey, only 45.8% of the community has learned or taught about physical disabilities in classes.

Braun said she is part of the 54.2% that has not been exposed to physical disabilities in her classes and that everything she has learned about the topic comes from her own experiences as well as independent research.

17.8% of people in the U.K. in 2021 have a disability.



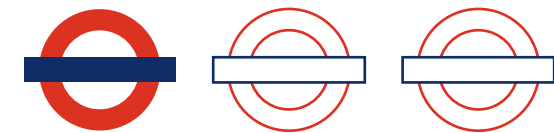
Source: Office for National Statistics



Londoners with a disability are unemployed.

Source: Trust for London

Approximately 1/3 of Tube stations



have step-free access.

Source: Transport for London



Graphics by Eden Leavey

“The lack of students with physical disabilities often, unfortunately, lowers the topic's priority.”
- Sam Hamilton ('23)

While Reis said there have been instances where physical disabilities have been discussed within the scope of his classes, he would like it to have a larger presence. "I don't think it needs to be a massive part of the curriculum, but I think a little more attention would be nice," Reis said.

Physical Education Teacher Danielle Taylor, who joined ASL this fall, said she previously worked at a school where a higher percentage of students had moderate to severe disabilities compared to ASL students. Consequently, Taylor said she gained experience teaching Special Olympics – a program dedicated to helping children and adults with disabilities improve their fitness – at that institution.

After working at the school for approximately five months, Taylor said the physical education program is well-adapted to the ability of the students.

"Our physical education program is incredibly inclusive to the population of students that we have on campus," Taylor said. "We are developing our lessons and our curriculum based on the type of learners that we have in school and making it as accessible as we can."

Moreover, Taylor said equipment is frequently adapted for students with physical disabilities during lessons. She said examples of these modifications include purchasing shorter rackets and lowering the height of the basketball hoops.

Taylor said the High School curriculum currently includes a mini-unit on disabilities sports where students play goalball with blindfolds to simulate vision impairments and basketball with

scooters to simulate walking abnormalities. Moving forward, she said she hopes the department will incorporate a lesson dedicated to the inclusion of physical disabilities into every unit of the curriculum.

"It would be amazing because you're learning what it is like to participate in a Paralympic-level sport," Taylor said. "There's an opportunity to view and see what sports look like at the Olympic level for other types of athletes."

Meanwhile, Science Teacher Alpha Toothman said portions of the Science 10 and Topics in Biology curriculum cover certain aspects of physical disabilities.

"In Science 10 we talk about Duchenne muscular dystrophy – DMD – but we talk about it from the genetic perspective," Toothman said. "In Topics in Bio, we talk about genetic disorders and disabilities based upon mutations and errors in their chromosomes or their DNA, but not the societal or social perspective."

Toothman said she would be interested to see a greater focus on the social aspects of physical disabilities within both the science curriculum and in other areas of the High School. She said Aquitas Week and Speaker Series provide opportunities for the community to learn more about overlooked topics such as physical disabilities.

In 2019, the school hosted a Speaker Series featuring Sinéad Burke, a disability activist who experiences dwarfism. Nicholson said Burke was incredibly well-received by the community and inspired many to contemplate a topic they had not spent much time discussing before.

"She did such an amazing job in every division of the school,"

Nicholson said. "It was really empowering. She was just a brilliant speaker and I had a lot of really positive feedback from students, as well as the energy and the questions in the assemblies."

Culture

Nicholson said although she scarcely ever hears about ableist interactions in the school, she periodically addresses students' misconceptions about physical disabilities.

"We've definitely been managing some language around learning support and students with physical disabilities," Nicholson said. "Usually it's in the Lower School, and a lot of it is around assumptions about student capacity. That's why things like Neurodiversity Week have been really important for us."

Within the High School, Hamilton said he has noticed his peers occasionally use language that is derogatory toward people with physical disabilities. He said he believes these instances

often occur due to a lack of exposure to the topic and that many students only think about day-to-day life from the perspective of an able-bodied person.

"You think your comments are harmless or that you're not actually affecting humans because you don't think it's a reality for people, but it is a reality," Hamilton said. "It's something that many students take for granted. We don't have to think of the world in a totally different light."

Ultimately, Toothman said while she would like to believe the community is inclusive of everyone, the low number of people in the school with visible physical disabilities make it difficult to be certain.

"My hypothetical self wants to say we are accepting of all physical differences," Toothman said. "But in actuality, if you haven't been exposed to it, it is extremely difficult to have an umbrella statement of exactly how open we would be because, unfortunately, society has placed a stigma on being different."



Photo courtesy Lydia Condon

CEO of Tilting the Lens Sinéad Burke gives a presentation in the School Center Oct. 7, 2019. She spoke to all three divisions of the school about her experience as a little person. She said her consulting firm works to ensure all spaces are accessible, regardless of physical ability.

Navigating ASL as a student with a physical disability

Most students with a disability have an Education Health and Care Plan that they submit to the school once admitted.

Throughout the year, meetings are held to allow students to provide feedback regarding their EHCP.



1. The school works with experts to ensure the institution's infrastructure and curriculum are adapted to support each individual.

2. The school implements necessary changes, often making adjustments over the summers as students progress through the school.

To view a related video of the Concert Choir singing with sign language after learning about the Deaf community, scan here:

