

Seattle Educator and USC Doctoral Graduate Shares Untold Story of Learning Differences in New Memoir

Dr. Paul R. Johnson's "Turtles Can Win" explores what happens when a student who is told he is struggling learns that he was never incapable of learning; he simply learned differently

TURTLES CAN WIN

How Learning Differences Taught
Me to Run My Own Race and
Still Cross the Finish Line

Paul R. Johnson, EdD

Orlando, Florida Aug 23, 2026 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - For much of his childhood and early academic career, Dr. Paul R. Johnson appeared to be a student who simply struggled in school.

He came dangerously close to failing middle school. He faced the possibility of repeating high school. At one point, he nearly walked away from college altogether.

What no one knew, including Johnson himself, was that he was navigating undiagnosed learning differences.

Decades later, that same student would earn three master's degrees and a doctorate from the University of Southern California.

On August 28, 2026, Johnson will share that journey publicly in "Turtles Can Win: How Learning Differences Taught Me to Run My Own Race and Still Cross the Finish Line," a memoir about learning differences, education, identity, resilience, and redefining what success looks like.

The book traces Johnson's journey from growing up in Seattle's Central District and attending one of the country's most academically competitive independent schools to navigating higher education, professional leadership, fatherhood, and ultimately his own understanding of how he learns.

But "Turtles Can Win" is not simply the story of a student who eventually succeeded.

It is a story about what can happen when people are judged by the speed at which they learn rather than the depth of what they are capable of becoming.

"The irony is that I spent years believing that I was the problem," Johnson said. "It took me a long time to understand that I wasn't incapable. I simply needed to understand how I learned and stop measuring my progress against someone else's timeline."

The inspiration for the memoir came years after Johnson had completed much of his education. As a father, he found himself participating in conversations about his own child's educational needs and began hearing familiar labels, assumptions, and concerns. The language was different, but the underlying experience felt remarkably similar to what he had encountered as a student.

Those experiences prompted Johnson to revisit his own educational history and ask questions he had never fully considered: How many students are struggling not because they lack ability, but because the systems around them have failed to recognize how they learn? How many adults have spent years believing they were not capable, only to discover later that their learning differences were never properly understood?

Johnson brings a unique perspective to those questions.

He is not writing solely as a person who experienced learning differences. He has spent decades working in education and organizational leadership and has served as a classroom teacher, student advisor, coach, trustee, board member, and school administrator. His professional experience

has given him a front-row view of the educational systems that shape students' opportunities and expectations.

His academic credentials make the contrast even more striking: the student who once struggled to keep pace eventually earned graduate degrees from the University of Washington, Villanova University, and Georgetown University before earning his doctorate in education from USC.

The book's central metaphor is the turtle.

In a culture that often celebrates speed, quick answers, accelerated achievement, and conventional measures of intelligence, Johnson asks readers to consider what happens when we stop treating speed as the primary measure of ability.

"The turtle taught me that moving differently isn't the same thing as moving backward," Johnson said. "Sometimes the person who appears to be moving the slowest is simply taking a different route to the finish line."

The memoir also examines Johnson's experiences as a Black student navigating predominantly white educational environments, his childhood in Seattle during a period of significant social and educational change, and the ways race, educational expectations, identity, and learning differences can intersect.

For Johnson, the story is ultimately bigger than his own experience.

He hopes the book encourages parents to look beyond labels, educators to question assumptions about struggling students, and students and adults with learning differences to reconsider what they believe is possible for themselves.

"I want the student who thinks they're behind to understand that their timeline is not a verdict on their potential," Johnson said. "And I want the adults around that student to ask a different question, not 'Why can't this student keep up?' but 'What might this student be capable of if we understood how they learn?'"

"Turtles Can Win" will be released August 28, 2026.

About Dr. Paul R. Johnson:

Dr. Paul Roman Johnson is an educator, organizational leader, education advocate, and lifelong learner. Born in New Orleans and raised in Seattle, he has held leadership roles in human resources, project management, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and K-12 education.

Throughout his career, Johnson has served as a classroom teacher, student advisor, coach, trustee, board member, and school administrator. He earned graduate degrees from the University of Washington, Villanova University, and Georgetown University and a Doctor of Education from the University of Southern California.

Johnson lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife, Ricole, their son, Roman, and their dog, Cookie Deaux.

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