

**Testimony of Dr. Margie B. Gillis,
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RHB 5562, Section 1, An Act Concerning Special Education
March 17, 2014**

Representative Fleischmann, Senator Stillman, and Members of the Education Committee, once again I present testimony on behalf of the students in our state who have been left behind in learning to read. RHB 5562 is a small step toward what is needed for our students with dyslexia. I thank the committee for raising the bill and respectfully suggest that the bill include more substantive language that includes a definition of dyslexia as well as a description of knowledge is required to effectively teach dyslexic students.

You may remember that my education roots are in special education – specifically teaching students with dyslexia how to read. I was fortunate to have studied with Isabelle Liberman at the University of Connecticut 40 years ago. At that very time and place, she and her colleagues at Haskins Laboratories made one of the most important scientific and educational discoveries of the 20th century – that is, that children who have difficulty learning to read struggle with something called phonemic awareness.

For the first fifteen years of my teaching career, I worked directly with students of all ages – from 5 to 45 – teaching them to read. Many of these students were dyslexic and had difficulty learning how to decode and spell words because of phonological processing problems. Since dyslexia is a neurologically based disorder, most were born with the problem and would continue to need ongoing support. But the good news was that they learned to read because I had learned the methods to treat that specific reading disability. Were they cured? No. But they could read well enough to get to the point where they were able to *read to learn* – something many of us do with relative ease and that most of *must do* every day to be able to do our jobs and live. I had to work almost as hard as they did because it *is* rocket science to teach reading and they *did* have to expend a tremendous amount of effort to master the requisite foundational skills.

Since I left the special education world to train general education teachers 25 years ago, I have seen first-hand that teachers are not trained adequately. Although most K-3 educators know the term *phonemic awareness* and some can even define it, they don't understand it well enough. Of the hundreds of teachers we've surveyed over the past 14 years, the average score on a test that demonstrates their understanding of the concept is **50%**. This means that most teachers don't know how to recognize when children struggle to master that all-important skill and equally important, they don't know how to teach the skill properly.

We must do a better job of identifying students with dyslexia and we must provide optimal instruction provided by exemplary teachers. This bill is a beginning. Please consider adding language to the bill to ensure that all of our students get the instruction they need and are entitled to in order to become proficient readers by third grade.