

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Erin Wood. I am a parent of two elementary-aged dyslexic children in Southington, Connecticut. I am writing to you in support of HRB 5562, Section 1, An Act Concerning Special Education, and am requesting that changes be made to this bill. I feel the story of my oldest son, a fourth grader, needs to be heard in support of this bill.

As a parent, your primary goal is to see your children succeed in life. As a public school teacher for six years of my life, I anxiously awaited the day my oldest son started school. Unfortunately, when my son began school, he also began a downward spiral. The Southington Public Schools failed my son and his entrance to school was the day it all began. From kindergarten to third grade, he struggled in reading. He failed to learn the alphabet, letter names, sounds and phonemic awareness skills. His fluency was years below grade level. At the end of third grade, he was unable to read beginning of first grade texts. As parents, we knew something was wrong. Teachers told us that our son's comprehension was the top of the class. They explained to us how his vocabulary was phenomenal and told us how smart he was. Despite this, he continued to fail in reading. We requested an educational evaluation three times and were refused by the District all three times. Despite school testing showing our son was below grade level in reading, the District claimed that he was progressing and there couldn't be any learning disabilities present. No EIP interventions were planned. As time passed, our situation became more and more dire. My son began to show anxious tendencies. Homework triggered aggressive tantrums and chants of "I just want to die." At age 8, he grew suicidal and was admitted to the Institute of Living. While at the Institute, his discussions with staff and psychologists were about school performance and his feelings of inadequacy. Before entering school, my son was a happy, well-adjusted child. School truly ruined him and it was all because the District and his teachers had not been adequately trained and were not fully aware of the signs of dyslexia.

After my son's breakdown, we spent an entire school year advocating for him. We hired an educational advocate. We pushed the District to perform an educational evaluation. The District finally agreed. The testing confirmed our suspicions that my son was dyslexic, but the district coordinator for special education denied that my son had a learning disability. She explained to us that our son was not learning disabled. The special education teacher and other team members dismissed my son's areas of weakness stating that he must not have tried hard on

those tests and stated that the inconsistencies didn't have any meaning. At one point, the team even told us that dyslexia was a medical condition and didn't fall under Specific Learning Disability. The District proposed we identify our son under Other Health Impaired for vision problems and anxiety. Knowing that our son had a learning disability, we pushed for outside testing and this testing confirmed that he had all the markers for dyslexia. Had the staff at our school been trained in the early detection of dyslexia, my son could have been spared years of emotional trauma.

After my son was identified as dyslexic, the special education teacher attempted to implement the Wilson program, a program in which she had no prior training. My son made no gains that school year. We advocated for our son and demanded that the District provide a teacher certified in the Wilson program. The District refused. We filed for a due process hearing with the state against our school District on the grounds of a child find violation. We came to an agreement with the District at a resolution session and part of that agreement involved a transfer of schools to a school with a Wilson certified teacher. Within five months of working with the certified Wilson teacher, my son reached grade level in reading. Because of the highly trained skills of this one teacher, my son's educational future is now bright. I am pleased to report he is now a confident, smart and well-adjusted fourth grader.

I would like you to take away several points from my story. First, I urge you to change HRB 5562 to include early screening for dyslexia. Our special education coordinator, the one person who should have had the knowledge in identification of these children, denied my son had a learning disability and inaccurately identified him. For four years, his teachers couldn't explain why he failed in reading and they missed all the common markers of dyslexia. We should not have to watch our children suffer from misunderstanding and ignorance. Our children are suffering from lack of self-esteem, anxiety and depression because their teachers do not understand them. Secondly, this bill must include a universal definition of dyslexia. My family spent three months in PPT meetings trying to attain services and interventions for my dyslexic son. The District argued that his condition was medical and did not fall under Specific Learning Disability, therefore his services were not aligned with his needs. I believe a universal definition will aid special education teams in identifying and providing the right early interventions to the children that so badly need it. Third, and finally, our educational system is sorely lacking in professional development concerning dyslexia. Dyslexic children can learn, they just need a very different approach. My son spent a year of his life in a special education classroom with a

teacher that did not receive adequate training. She was implementing a program in which she had no formal training and, therefore, was not implementing it with fidelity. There is no question she was a good, well-intentioned teacher, but she simply was not trained. On the flip-side, in just five short months, under the highly trained supervision of a Wilson certified teacher, my son gained three years of progress in reading. Our case is an example of how important professional development is in the remediation of dyslexia. Our school district has only a handful of Wilson trained teachers. Only some schools are lucky enough to have these teachers on staff. We have eight elementary schools. One in five children are dyslexic. This means that at our eight elementary schools, there are at least 3 or 4 children in each classroom with dyslexia. And we only have a few teachers certified in remediation. We are one of the lucky families that was able to access a highly trained teacher. What about all those other children? Will we sit back and watch them fail, or will we train their teachers so they can succeed?

In summary, I want to thank you for reading my testimony. I leave you with a comment my son made to me when he was finally correctly identified and we told him he had dyslexia. Through sobs and tears, he said to me "You mean I'm not stupid? All this time I thought I was just stupid. My teachers told me I could read, but I couldn't and they just didn't understand. At least now I know I'm not stupid!" This is your chance to make a difference in the life of a child. Please consider modifying HRB 5562 to include early screening, a definition of dyslexia and professional development in the remediation of dyslexia.

Respectfully,

Erin W. Wood

Southington, CT