

Testimony for Public Hearing
Education Committee
March 17, 2014

Karima A. Robinson
323 Shelton Ave., Apt. 2
New Haven CT 06511

RHB 5562, Section 1, An Act Concerning Special Education

Good Morning Education Committee members. My name is Karima A. Robinson. I am a tutor for Literacy Volunteers of Greater New Haven. I am also an independent scholar, educator, advocate, and theatre artist. I have over ten years of teaching experience at the college level. And I am a dyslexic adult. I am proof that children do not grow-out-of dyslexia. We learn to compensate and struggle to create productive lives for ourselves.

I am here today to ask you to modify the RHB 5562, Section 1, An Act Concerning Special Education in three ways. Under the federal education law IDEA, dyslexia is listed under the category of a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). I am here today to request an Individual Education Program (IEP) form for SLD-Dyslexia. I am also here today to request the adoption of a universal definition of dyslexia, which will facilitate an understanding of dyslexia and lead to more rapid interventions. And finally, I am here to request training and professional development for teachers and educators at all levels on how to identify dyslexia and educate children who have it.

Students can and should be identified in the early elementary school years. The earlier a student is identified and treated for dyslexia, the easier it is to correct this condition. As the student matures, she finds ways to compensate or avoid situations where her symptoms are

exposed. Her dyslexia is then compounded by the many “tricks” that she learns to cover or mask the symptoms. This makes the educator’s task of correcting dyslexia more challenging. I am requesting that the bill be modified to acknowledge that dyslexia falls under the category of a Specific Learning Disability (SLD).

I am also asking that a universal definition of dyslexia be adopted. This is needed because dyslexia manifests in a variety of ways. The attributes go beyond reading to include difficulties with: spelling, math, handwriting, ADD, ADHD, memory, coordination, balance, motor skills, timing and rhythm (sensing how many seconds, minutes or hours have passed), and the brain’s compass function (knowing which way is right vs. left, east vs. west, etc). Each individual will have a different grouping and severity of symptoms. There are also different theories about the root causes of dyslexia and how to treat it. Some specialists believe that it is an inner-ear problem, while others blame our unique visual-thinking abilities that make us extremely creative. In spite of the complexity of dyslexia and its many variations, a universal definition would facilitate understanding and lead to more rapid interventions. There are many books on the subject and the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity is an excellent resource that is unique to Connecticut. Partnering with an institution like this one would facilitate the creation of a universal definition of dyslexia and support a comprehensive understanding of it in our public school system.

Lastly, I am here to advocate for training and professional development for teachers and educators on how to identify and educate children who have dyslexia. This is a widespread problem. According to the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity: 1 in 5, or 20% of the population is dyslexic. Children who have dyslexia become dyslexic adults with varying levels of literacy. In New Haven county alone, 30% of the adult population of are at the lowest level of

literacy. At Literacy Volunteers of Greater New Haven, we tutor adults who have fallen through the cracks of the public school system. Last year Literacy Volunteers tutored over 1,200 adults in basic literary skills. Adults from 18-75 years of age enter our program reading at levels between kindergarten to eighth grade. Most students we serve are functioning at the lower end of the spectrum, from kindergarten to fourth grade levels. Because I have dyslexia, I notice that most of the students we serve also have dyslexia. I recognize the signs from my experiences in elementary school. I recommend that this bill provide training and awareness for teachers and educators in order for them to also recognize the characteristics of dyslexia.

My students have difficulty concentrating and often do not comprehend what they have read. They read slowly, struggling with each word. The reading process is tiring and unpleasant for them. Two of my students are in their 60s. They are reading at a second grade level. They struggle to fill out the forms needed to receive medical treatment, apply for a driver's license, and receive their social security benefits. They often say that "they forgot their glasses at home" as an excuse not to fill out the form, and as means of getting others to complete this paperwork for them. I sadly watch them make the same "mistakes" that I made when I was elementary school. They transpose letters, numbers, and words around on the page as they read aloud or write.

Even though I am at a much higher reading level, I identify with my students. I remain terribly frustrated by my disability. I am a slow reader, especially of technical and academic writing. Reading, writing, and math are tiring and difficult experiences for me too. I am not sure how or why I was able to compensate for my dyslexic symptoms and achieve a reasonable reading level, while my students were not. And I am at a loss as to how to correct it in others and myself.

Today spelling, grammar, math, and reading are still huge problems in my life. I am always in need of spell check, grammar check, copyeditors, calculators, and audio books. Even with modern technology, I still make “mistakes” that computers cannot catch. (For example: typing *here* when I mean *hear*, or *sacred* when I mean *scared*.) I have to read most academic or technical writing three to six times to understand its meaning. My frustration has led me to seek new methods for treating dyslexic adults.

I tell you my story, not to win your sympathy, but rather to convince you to modify this bill to ensure that those less fortunate than me, the children whose condition is so severe that they are not able to mask it, can receive the treatment and compassion that they need to succeed.

The mission of Literacy Volunteers is to eradicate illiteracy in the adult population. The modifications that I am asking you to consider will go a long way in achieving this goal. If we can identify and correct this issue in children, we can drastically reduce the illiteracy rate among future adults. Improving reading comprehension, writing, and math skills in children will reduce high-school drop out rates. It will also reduce crime rates and the numbers of people living at or below the poverty line. Literate adults acquire better jobs and are better employees. They keep their families healthy. They make greater contributions to their communities.

The inclusion of dyslexia on the Individual Education Program (IEP) form, without a definition of dyslexia does not provide the knowledge parents, teachers, and evaluators need to check that box. Parents, teachers, and educators need a clear universal definition of dyslexia to make this determination. I ask you to consider training and professional development for teachers and educators at all levels.

The people that I tutor are wonderful people. They have big hearts and great ideas. They are creative thinkers who want to live independent lives and make greater contributions to

society. The lack of awareness of dyslexia in our education system essentially excludes them from endless opportunities. They should not be inadvertently punished by society because their brains work differently. They naturally think “outside of the box.” They are the kind of people that Google is looking to hire. Let’s create a future where children with dyslexia can learn to correct their symptoms before they become major stumbling blocks in their development. The additions I am asking you to implement will ensure that these children can contribute their unique perspective to society.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karima A. Robinson