

Testimony of Nancy Prescott
Executive Director, Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, on Education Committee RHB 5562
March 17, 2014

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and distinguished members of the Education Committee, my name is Nancy Prescott and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, known to many as CPAC. CPAC is a statewide non-profit organization whose sole purpose is to provide training and information to parents of children with disabilities so they can effectively advocate on behalf of their children. The success of our work is ultimately measured by positive education outcomes for students with disabilities.

Section 1 of HB 5562 begins to address a failure of our current education system in identifying and meeting the unique learning needs of children with dyslexia. We support HB 5562, Section 1 with some modifications recognizing that as currently written, it falls short of fully meeting the needs of students with dyslexia.

According to the National Center on Learning Disabilities, "...dyslexia is a lifelong challenge. This language-based processing disorder can hinder reading, writing, spelling and sometimes even speaking." CPAC staff members speak to parents throughout the state who suspect their child may have dyslexia and/or may have already been identified with dyslexia. More often than not, this particular diagnosis comes from a professional outside of the school system. Ensuring that our public schools have the understanding and tools for early and appropriate identification of dyslexia is one of the important features we feel is missing from the bill as proposed. We feel it is imperative that the Education Committee recognize that like any disability, dyslexia has no socio-economic, language or racial boundaries. A family's circumstances and ability to seek outside evaluations, tutoring or support should not take the place of the public school system's responsibility to appropriately identify and teach a child with any disability, including dyslexia.

Two main themes emerge in the parent stories we hear. One theme is, from an early age there are a group of children who appear capable of learning to read, yet regardless of the intensity or frequency of interventions tried by the school the child is unsuccessful in mastering this critical skill. A second common theme we see relates to students who are identified as eligible for special education services under the broad category of specific learning disability. In far too many cases, even with the benefit of specialized instruction the student fails to make significant gains. This problem is shared with us by parents from all walks of life, from all races, ethnicities, and from all socio-economic and educational levels. Our experience tells us that students with dyslexia are an underserved group of students included in Connecticut's achievement gap and current school reform efforts will not meet their learning needs. HB5562 begins the conversation of how public schools need to think differently about meeting the unique needs of children with dyslexia.

Parents frequently report to us that the team they are working with does not understand the nature of dyslexia. Often parents are the ones doing intensive research to figure out what might help their child. Because students with dyslexia may be very bright, but still have significant struggles, sometimes they are blamed for not trying, being lazy, and/or not paying attention. They are often told they could do better if only they just tried harder. The time has come for educators to become more informed on dyslexia, so no student is being blamed for their disability. Dyslexia is a highly misunderstood disability and that will not change unless we educate the educators about what they can do to help these students. The good news is that there

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are research-based interventions that research has shown are effective for students with dyslexia. The bad news is there are not nearly enough highly trained individuals prepared and certified in those research-based programs. School personnel must be better prepared to conduct early screening and identification of children who have dyslexia and they must have professional development in order to utilize effective, research based interventions with rigor and fidelity.

Please consider amending House Bill No. 5562 to include providing teachers with the professional development they need to appropriately identify and effectively teach students with dyslexia.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our testimony.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nancy B. Prescott".

Nancy Prescott
Executive Director
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