

Aimee Misset
46 Alberta Street
Waterbury, CT 06708

I am writing in support of HRB No. 5562, An Act Concerning Special Education, Section 1, however, I feel strongly that additions are necessary to allow the SLD-Dyslexia option on the Individualized Education Plan to have the intended impact. Though I cannot be there to speak in person, I hope that my personal story as a parent and educator helps to highlight the need for teacher training and early screening of children suspected of having dyslexia, otherwise the additional IEP language will not help the many students who go unidentified. I apologize for the length, but it was difficult to communicate our years of struggle in less.

Our Story

"I'm no good at it."

"But I've never seen him write his letters backwards before."

"He's just kind of average."

"Maybe you just need to read more at home."

These are words I will never forget. They may not sound all that special, but to me they were devastating.

My son can build a working candy dispenser out of Legos. He knows more about animals, and oddly enough, physics as a 9 yr old than I do as an adult. In the summer he can make a bow and arrow out of string and whittled sticks and builds the most incredible forts out of wood and rocks. He has the vocabulary of an adult and likes to use words like "succulent" about his dinner to make us laugh. One of his favorite shows is Mythbusters, because he loves to watch the outrageous experiments. Last year, he came home from school after previewing the Book Fair and he was SO excited. They had a Mythbusters book with experiments that you could try at home. He didn't usually get excited about books, so I thought this was wonderful. The day after he brought it home, I found him crying over it because he wanted to do the experiments, but was struggling to read them. It was weeks before he picked up the book again.

People always commented on how bright my son was as a toddler, but I noticed he didn't learn the letter names and sounds as quickly as I expected.. By the end of first grade, his teacher mentioned that he needed to work on his fluency, meaning how quickly and smoothly he was able to read. I noticed that he was having trouble learning his sight words. He would know them one day and not the next. Or he'd recognize it in one sentence, but not another. As a certified teacher, who specializes in reading, I became concerned. My first step was to take him to a behavioral optometrist. This step was recommended to me by a friend, who had a son with some behavioral vision issues like difficulty tracking and focusing. Turns out my son had some vision issues and we began light therapy and the doctor recommended some minor accommodations at school which his 2nd grade teacher was happy to make. I was hopeful that once we began to treat some of his vision issues that his reading would improve. However, he fell further behind and became more frustrated.

“I don’t want to read, I’m no good at it” became the nightly battle. He would finally agree to read with me, but wouldn’t let anyone else hear him read. After a page or two he would beg to stop. This was not my little boy who used to love our nightly reading together and it broke my heart.

Over the summer between second and third grade, a dear friend, who also happened to be a newly retired special education teacher agreed to come to our house and do some informal testing to see what might be going on. That was the first time I heard someone say what I had already suspected. “He’s dyslexic.” She’d bet on it, she said. Part of me was relieved, but part of me knew the hardest part had just begun. See, I know I’m blessed to have the training I do as a reading teacher, which allowed me to recognize that there might be a problem. I had knowledge and expectations that many parents wouldn’t have when it comes to reading and learning. But because of my profession, I also knew that a diagnosis of dyslexia meant very little in schools in CT. So I began the process of trying to get educational testing done through our school district. I requested a meeting in September with his third grade teacher to explain my concerns and suspicions and request the school open an Early Intervention Process case on my son. When I used the word dyslexic about Will, his teacher, a very kind and hard working woman said “But I’ve never seen him write his letters backwards before.” And I knew that his chances for getting appropriate help that year were slim to none. I don’t fault his teacher. Most teachers would respond similarly because we aren’t trained in recognizing signs of dyslexia, let alone appropriate interventions for students who may have it. But still, those words made me cringe. How was this woman going to help my son?

The special education teacher helped open his Intervention case and he began to see a tutor once or twice a week. However, we also began to notice frustration in Math, which used to be his strength at school. By the way, conceptually he gets math, but memorizing facts and reading word problems that may or may not have extra information and lining up multiple digit problems all were a struggle. After several months I requested a PPT meeting. I felt that he wasn’t making enough growth. He was still reading over a year below grade level. When his teacher was asked to report out at the meeting she said “He’s just kind of average.” Though it was meant well, like he was doing okay, it was like a kick in the face. Every parent believes their child is special (all are), but my amazing, bright little boy who was crying at night over doing homework? Kind of average? And based on his “averageness”, it was determined he didn’t qualify for testing at that time. One of the administrators at the meeting said that “Maybe you just need to read more at home.” I left the meeting crying, embarrassed, frustrated, and sad.

The schools response was unacceptable to me, but I was tired of trying to convince them that something was wrong. I contacted a private educational psychologist and paid over a thousand dollars to hear the same words my friend had told me the summer before, “He is dyslexic.” But along with that label came the other news that I remind my son of almost daily. His IQ puts him in the 96th percentile for intelligence with incredible areas of strength. His strengths far outweigh his weaknesses. And even at the young age of 9, this was enough to change Will’s outlook. He is smart, but his brain is wired a little

differently and he has to learn ways to trick it. That's how it was explained to him and he was okay with that.

"He's dyslexic."

Those words meant the world to us, but changed very little in his day to day school life. Armed with testing and his official diagnoses of dyslexia, dysgraphia (difficulties with written language), and a visual processing disorder, I requested another PPT. I knew that under the current special education guidelines, his achievement scores were probably too high for him to qualify for special education services. His amazing strengths that allowed him to compensate enough in reading to be considered kind of average in school, also kept him from getting more help. Instead, we got a 504 plan that would at least provide him with some accommodations in the classroom that would help him manage his dyslexia better. Of those three diagnoses, it's the visual processing disorder that qualified him for a 504, because it's considered a medical issue. However, it's not the most important diagnosis, just a symptom of the dyslexia, but it was enough to get the ball rolling. They team was taken aback at his test results and said that they could clearly see the discrepancy now between his above average intelligence and strengths and his struggle to read and write, however he still only qualifies for a 504 plan.

Will is now in 4th grade and he made honor roll both marking periods so far. I am beyond proud of how hard he is working. The accommodations are helping him, but he has to work extremely hard at home and at school and his frustration frequently shows when he's tired at night. He also continues visual therapy and occupational therapy outside of school, both of which cost co-pays and sometimes are paid out of pocket when our max visits for the year have been reached. Because he doesn't qualify for specific reading help through the 504 plan, we've considered hiring a private tutor, but the cost is prohibitive at this time and the wait list for free tutoring through the Dyslexia Center of CT is over a year long. Having the category of dyslexia as an option to qualify for Special Education would allow William access to specialized reading instruction at school.

I took the time to write this testimony because I do not want other children to say the words William used to, or parents to hear some of the comments that I did.

"I'm no good at it" – I now convince Will to work at his reading by explaining that it may not be what he loves, but that he needs to read and write well enough to do all of the things he does love, like science and engineering. But I'm speaking not only for Will, but for the many students I see every day at my school who I know aren't working to their potential because no one knows how much they are struggling or how to help them. How many of them are full of amazing potential that will never be realized? My profession allowed me to recognize the symptoms in my own son, but most parents need to rely on teachers to do it for them. We need early screening and research based instruction so that all children can become successful readers and writers.

"But he doesn't write things backwards" or "Maybe you need to read more at home" or "He's just kind of average" – It is clear that teachers do not have sufficient training in recognizing or teaching children with dyslexia. It was through a long process of personal research and reaching out to other

professionals that I was able to come to that conclusion for Will and pursue getting him help. I didn't leave school as a new teacher with ANY knowledge of dyslexia that was meaningful to my practice day to day. It was just a word that we didn't really use anymore in Connecticut. I learned the hard way how meaningful a word it really can be. We need teachers to have training in recognizing the signs of dyslexia and ways to intervene in the classroom in order to determine if testing is necessary.

If the necessary changes are made to this bill, the conversations will change. I want to hear "I'm dyslexic, but I'm learning. I am smart. I can do it" and "I can help".