

March 11, 2014

To the Connecticut Education Committee,

I am writing in support of RHB No. 5562, An Act concerning Special Education, however I am requesting additions to the bill as stated.

My name is Cindy Dunn and my son, Cayden, is dyslexic. He is 14 and currently in 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Newtown Middle School. Unfortunately, Cayden's early years in school were filled with tears, feelings of inadequacy and frustration. You see, Cayden was not diagnosed with Dyslexia until 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Cayden's trouble in school started right from the beginning. In Kindergarten we would receive notes home from his teacher expressing that Cayden was upset or having meltdowns because he found sound spelling difficult and was often frustrated when completing daily work. That year, and every year after, Cayden was sent to the Reading Recovery department in his elementary school. The reports from the Reading Recovery teachers would say things like "reading and spelling below grade level, not forming letters correctly, word reversals, letter confusion, difficulty blending words, miscalls words, lapses in serial order in writing words, neglects right left directional scanning, adds/omits words, struggles during writing time, the list goes on and on. Every year in Elementary school, Cayden was receiving extra help, but was still below grade level in reading and writing.

The last year in Elementary school, which is 4<sup>th</sup> grade in Newtown, Cayden's teacher contacted me and told me that Cayden was becoming very emotional in the classroom. Cayden was insisting that he wasn't good at anything; he hated himself and refused to write. Also that same year, I sat at Cayden's desk during a parent's night and started to read a note that he wrote to me. When I saw Cayden's note, my eyes filled with tears, I could not read what Cayden had written to me. I looked to my left and right and could easily read the notes that the other 4<sup>th</sup> graders had written, but Cayden's note was completely illegible. Believe it or not, this is the first time I thought to my self "there is something really wrong here". This child is so intelligent, how has he gotten to 4<sup>th</sup> grade without being able to write a sentence?

That year we had Cayden in counseling to deal with his sadness and anxiety, lack of self-esteem and confidence and we also asked the school to test him for learning issues. We were not familiar with what that actually meant or what the procedure was, we just simply said to his classroom teacher, his reading teacher and the principal "this does not make sense!" They replied by saying that Cayden had to work harder and there was nothing additional that they could do. We thought, "OK they are the experts, they must know best."

5<sup>th</sup> grade was a new school for Cayden, Reed Intermediate School (RIS). On day one, I called Cayden's new teacher and told her of our struggles. After observing Cayden in her classroom for a few months, his teacher agreed that there was

certainly a disconnect between Cayden's intellect and his ability to read and write. She suggested private tutoring in addition to the Response to Intervention (RTI) that he was already receiving.

This is where life changed for all of us. We hired a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to tutor Cayden after school at our home. After working with Cayden for a few months, the tutor handed me a pamphlet about dyslexia. When I read the pamphlet it was like the sun came out for the first time in years. Almost every symptom on that pamphlet fit Cayden to a tee. My husband and I scratched our heads and wondered why hadn't anyone mentioned this before? 5 years of Reading Recovery in elementary school and no one caught this? Does anyone in that Elementary school know what Dyslexia is? They must, they are the experts at teaching kids to read. They do it everyday.

We never looked back after that day. With the encouragement of Cayden's tutor and his 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, we asked his new school to test Cayden for learning disability. We sat in a meeting and listened to their staff use unfamiliar acronyms and show plots and graphs all pointing to the fact that Cayden makes "adequate progress" in RTI program. They would not test him. In hindsight, we know that Cayden's rate of progress was never going to get him to grade level in his lifetime. We decided rather than waste more valuable time, we would take matters into our own hands and wallet.

In the fall of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Cayden underwent testing by an outside psychologist (cost = \$5200). Cayden was diagnosed with dyslexia and a writing disorder. We called another meeting with his school with the hopes of having Cayden placed in special education to receive the necessary scientific based instruction. We were accompanied by our new entourage, which included the outside psychologist, an educational advocate, and Cayden's new tutor who is trained in Ortin-Gillingham. We presented our psycho-educational evaluation to the school team members. The school decided to do some testing of their own and finally concurred that Cayden (now in 6<sup>th</sup> grade) was decoding at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. Cayden was accepted into special education.

We thought this was the end of our struggles but it was really just the beginning. We thought Cayden would get the scientific based instruction that he needed and would begin to improve. This did not happen. RIS was not equipped to handle this disability. As far as we knew there were no personnel that were fully trained and experienced in Ortin-Gillingham or Wilson type programs. The school would only ensure us that they would use "Wilson type materials". They could not guarantee they would use these materials the way the program was intended and proven to give results. We felt we had no other choice but to give the school a chance. Cayden did not make significant progress at RIS in special education.

At the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade we met with our new Planning and Placement team at Newtown Middle School, in preparation for 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Again, this school was not equipped to provide Cayden with a program that would lead to success. They

basically planned to drop Cayden into already existing special education classes that had little to do with addressing his needs. We consulted a lawyer and educational advocate that told us we could fight the school to get the right program for Cayden or put our money and time towards a more reliable outcome. We enrolled Cayden in a school for learning disabled children for 7<sup>th</sup> grade (\$42,000 tuition) and there, among other programs, he completed the Wilson Reading program from beginning to end. Best decision we ever made! This type of program, when used with fidelity, is a life changer! Cayden is now reading at grade level and his spelling has improved dramatically, enough so that Spell Check can recognize the words he is trying to spell. Had Cayden received this kind of reading instruction in elementary school, so much sadness and frustration could have been avoided, not to mention all of the time wasted trying to teach him to read in a manner that was never going to be successful.

The truth is that the diagnosis changed everything for us, especially Cayden. We as parents were able to educate ourselves about dyslexia and the depth in which it affects all areas of learning and in turn we could advocate for a more appropriate education for our son. Cayden began to heal. He began to realize that he is not stupid and is not to blame for this disability. He was hopeful to be taught in a way that he would lead to his success.

My husband and I made two assumptions along this journey that were detrimental to our son's education. First, we assumed that the school; teachers, principal, and psychologist, knew best about teaching children to read and had knowledge of learning disabilities. Since the word "dyslexia" was not mentioned to us until 5<sup>th</sup> grade we know that this assumption was wrong. Second, we assumed that getting a diagnosis would ensure proper instruction. This was also wrong.

The proposed bill RHB, as stated, is not enough. It is not enough to just merely state in a child's IEP that he is dyslexic. A child won't get to the point of an IEP if not first identified with the disability. The chances of identification will greatly increase if teachers, school psychologists and principals are educated about the tendencies of dyslexic students. Mandatory professional development for educators and early screening is imperative for change to occur.

By fourth grade, my son was depressed and was drained of all confidence and self-esteem. He just could not understand (nor could his parents) why he tried so hard and he couldn't do what the other kids could do so easily. The repeated failure in school for these children is damaging in so many ways.

In the words of my dyslexic teenager- "This is a no-brainer. Why wouldn't you educate all teachers about a learning disability that affects as many as 1 in 5 students in their classroom? Once you know what you are dealing with, there are scientifically based proven programs to help kids. Teachers don't have to reinvent the wheel. The research is done. They just need to be trained."

If our ultimate goal is to give an appropriate education to every child in Connecticut, then we must address the issue of dyslexia in its entirety. We must begin by providing mandatory professional development for our educators focused on dyslexia awareness. We must also ensure that the appropriate scientific-based programs are utilized in every school with fidelity. Without this, we may be neglecting the needs of as much as twenty percent of our student population. Is that a percentage that you are willing to live with? I am not. I have seen first hand the damage this kind of neglect can do to the spirit of a child.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.

Cindy Dunn  
6 Valley View Road  
Newtown CT, 06470  
(203) 426-3472