Testimony

Hi, My name is Dawn Learsy and this is my son Otto Learsy-Cahill he is dyslexic and so am I. Because of Otto's genetic tendency for dyslexia, I was rhyming with him, and going over the alphabet, before he could walk. Otto went to a "free play" focused preschool where he had a wonderful time, but early literacy skills were not stressed.

In kindergarten, Otto's personality started to change. Otto was a boisterous boy with many friends in preschool but I started noticing that he was becoming quiet and cautious From a child who always had something to say, I was told by his teacher, he avoided raising his hand in class. His teacher noted that he was progressing slowly in his reading skills. I mention that Otto had a family history of dyslexia. I was starting to panic but I was assured by his teacher that Otto's slow progress was still within normal range. We left it at that. His kindergarten teacher was wonderful with the kids. They loved her, she was smart, seasoned and has seen many children mature and catch up. By the end of kindergarten Otto had a few words he could recognize and reading books (even books being read to him) had moved - from being one of the top, most loved activities to just above eating broccoli. He was unwilling to go over the" boring alphabet". A week before first grade Otto developed tics.

In first grade, Otto's transformation from leader of the pack to a child who prefered to sit in the back of the room continued.Otto, who had had tons of friends in preschool, now had only a few kids he related too. I could not blame these changes on pressures of transitioning from a well loved preschool to his new school, now an old school. The mild mother's panic I had in kindergarten was starting to get stronger. When I visited his class as the "secret reader", I saw displayed, one of the class's finished

writing projects The final products were posted on one of those huge floor to ceiling pin boards. The title of the project was “Things I like” Each child had a photo of themselves pasted on top of a piece of off white paper. One child, wrote “My dog Sally” with a crayon figure of dog with an exaggerated red leash, other children scrawled names of the people in their family, some of the children wrote long sentences. one child, wrote “vacation” , with a blue sky, and a rectangle beach and huge sun, only cut off by the corners of the paper. I looked for Otto’s. There was his picture. He had a picture of five people, a house, and some crayon markings. Not a word. Not even a letter. It was an illustration.

During his first teacher’s conference of first grade, I was told again that Otto got along well with the other kids, he was well behaved, and when he spoke in class which was rare, he had insightful things to say, and his reading was progressing slowly. I asked the teacher if there was anything I or the school could due to support him. She assured me she would continue to watch his progress. After this meeting, and seeing his work, and comparing his work to his classmates, coupled with his family history of dyslexia, plus the more disturbing soft signs of depression and anxiety, I decided to have him tested. According to Speech and Language evaluation, he scored so low in phonemic awareness that they were unable to give me a score. (phonemic awareness is one of the key deficits in dyslexia) I sent the results to the school with a letter requesting that Otto receive extra support. After my first PPT, Otto started getting extra help in reading , but this was already in the middle of his first grade year. By the end of first grade it was obvious to all the adults that worked with him at school, that Otto was having real trouble learning to read. He had now fallen far behind his classmates. He had failed RTI(Response to Intervention) Otto was given a full battery of psychological and achievement tests and thereafter was designated for special education. Otto, on other hand was able to hide his difficulties from his classmates, but would wistfully come and tell me about the other kids who were already reading chapter books.

In second grade, with special help Otto started to make gains in his reading. Yet, the overall early academic experience had changed my extroverted baby boy into my introverted big boy. He found a good friend in second grade, who also went to special ed. Otto started to come out of his shell.

In third grade when the focus was “read to learn”. Otto was still behind but was catching up. Between having a good friend and catching up to the other kids, third grade was wonderful. Unfortunately fourth grade was around the corner.

In fourth grade, Otto had to not only read to learn but now, he had to spell and write. He would get 100 percent right on his spelling tests, but was unable to repeat the performance with the same words a week later. Even the simplest words were misspelled. Otto could memorize but he still was unable to encode. This was also complicated by the fact that In forth grade his best friend left school and now the other kids noticed Otto’s difficulties and they were not nice.In fourth grade your academic and social worth is literally spelled out. However, Otto persisted, despite the social isolation, and academic frustration, by the end of fourth grade he was at grade level for reading, grade level for writing, but still below grade level for spelling.He had also been diagnosed with depression

Fourth Grade is also the time that Otto received his triennial review. During that review, I was told that Otto was going to lose his services in Middle School, because he was at grade level in reading and writing and had done exceptionally well on his overall CMT scores, despite not reaching mastery in many of the subsets. Also, his triennial testing had revealed 3 Standard deviations difference between his verbal abilities and his non verbal abilities. In the old discrepancy model, there would be no question that my son would be qualified for help. My son is what is called twice exceptional, gifted and dyslexic. So here we are again, at

crossroads. My son is now OK in fifth grade. He still can not spell even simple words and his writing is hampered by this inability. I feel these problems are not being directly addressed in special education. He has lost some of his early literacy skills, which again are revealed in his spelling/ encoding. He still is uncomfortable reading aloud, and when he does he has obvious fluency problems, as well as problems with decoding multisyllabic words.

In Middle School, with all its new demands of independence and complexities of social growth, I would think that he would need more help, not less. Otto is a great kid: kind, considerate, funny, hardworking, smart, and an excellent baseball player, but he still needs help. Please make sure kids like him get the help they need in a timely fashion, and receive support as long as they need it, in order that they may be successful, and please do not discriminate against kids because of pre-prescribed levels of need.

Thank you for listening.