



Kelly Howard

Before the  
Education Committee

Regarding:

R.H.B 5562 Section 1 An Act Concerning Special Education

March 13, 2014

Good Afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and other members of the Education Committee. My name is Kelly Howard, mother of Zoey and Katie Howard. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the proposed bill listed above.

My daughter, Zoey, is a 6year old Fraternal Twin. She is currently in first grade, attending Bakerville Consolidated Elementary School in New Hartford, Connecticut. She was recently diagnosed with Language Based Learning Disability/Dyslexia and Expressive Language Disorder.

The first signs of learning based difficulties arose in preschool, when they did their year-end assessment before going to Kindergarten. Zoey had great difficulty retaining the alphabet and names of shapes. The Director of the program was very concerned about the results this was in June 2013.

The following September, Zoey began a half day kindergarten program at Bakerville Consolidated Elementary School. She was in the same class as her sister Katie. Part of their program was a requirement to memorize 25 high frequency words. Katie learned the words with relative ease. Zoey struggled and struggled. Neither my husband and I nor the girls knew what was wrong. We tried everything. Zoey could remember some of the words Monday and then forget them by Wednesday. At first we thought she was just being lazy and we would get upset. We would tell her let's just keep practicing. We had no idea what she was going through. We had no idea what she was going through. What a difficult task. We even told her when she could get all the words memorized; we would take her to NY City to buy an American Girl Doll. We were desperate and would have done anything to get her to learn these words.

It was in November at the time of a Parent Teacher conference that we learned something was wrong. I remember going into that conference so happy thinking I was going to be told how smart my girls were. Instead the teacher looked at Tim and me and said, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?" Foolishly we took the good news first. Katie was learning well towards the high end of the class. As for Zoey, her teacher said, "I do not know what is going on?"

It was like an out-of-body experience for me as Zoey's teacher walked us through the work she had been doing with my daughter, explaining to us what she was experiencing. Here we have one child doing so well while the other struggled. The teacher told us a story about a circle time experience in which she call on the kids to answer various questions. Being selected is a real honor and the kids clamor to be picked. In this instance, the teacher picked Zoey but Zoey could not answer the question. The other kids were all yelling, "I know it, I know it, pick me."

Katie got so upset she started yelling, "Zoey, you know this, I know you know this, just answer the question."

I could feel the pain and embarrassment my little girl must have felt. It went on and on. The last story the teacher told us was about an independent timed test she had given the class. They were to write down a few of the so called 'popcorn' words in a simple sentence and draw a picture. She told us Zoey froze - she was confused and didn't know what to do. She looked around at her friends hoping to see what was on their paper. The teacher said she could see Zoey struggling but it was meant to be an independent assignment. She knew it was uncomfortable for Zoey but she could not do anything. All I could think was how awful my poor little girl must have felt. I wished I could have been there with her. I kept picturing her little face looking for me.

After the conference, I went and sat in my car and cried. One by one I felt like my hopes and dreams were being shattered. I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. All my friends were telling me how proud they were of their children, how great they did on their progress reports. Poor Katie; I could not even celebrate her achievement the way I should have. I was too numb and consumed with heartache and worry for Zoey. I regret that now.

My husband and I work long hours and by the time we get home at night, the girls just want to play with us. They would only see us a few hours before bed time so the last thing they wanted us doing was forcing more work on them - after all, this was Kindergarten. That night I reached out to a friend Colleen who has a business called, Little Hands Big Ideas, which teaches children sign language and intensive reading. She charges \$100 an hour which wasn't in our budget, but we were desperate and were willing to do whatever was necessary. We hired her to work with Zoey in the morning before Kindergarten, and then she would drop her off at school.

In addition to the extra help Zoey was getting at school with the paraprofessional and her Teacher, she worked with Colleen through the end of the school year or mid-June. At this point, Zoey told us she didn't like school anymore and did not want to go back. She just wanted to go to camp. It must have been hard for her. My husband also told me a story that was like a knife in my heart. He took one morning off so he could drop Zoey for her tutoring session. He said Zoey was so excited in the morning; she put on her usual big puffy fairy/princess party dress and a fancy headband with a big bow. Tim said when he pulled up to Colleen's house; he looked in the review mirror at Zoey. He saw Zoey her look out at Colleen's house, realizing where she was, she let out a deep sigh (out of frustration) and then lowered her head. He said it was the saddest thing he'd ever seen. Then she slowly took off her pretty headband, paused for a moment like that and then reached her little hand out to him and handed him the headband, and said, "I don't feel like wearing this anymore". Then with a lowered head and a sad face she went into Colleen's house. Tim knew Zoey liked the tutor; it wasn't her that was the problem. - It was that Zoey had such difficulty learning to spell that the strong negative connotation that went along with facing the task, was overwhelming and creating a feeling of hopelessness for her. It was at this point in time that Zoey would ask me, Mommy am I stupid? Mommy why don't I learn like Katie? I would tell her, Zoey everyone learns differently. Do not worry how other people are learning. We will find the way you learn best. She kept asking me the same question periodically and I would give her the same answer. Then I started to tell her that I learned the same way as her, she said you did? I said yes. I told her how my sister learned everything so fast. This helped her a little.

Then one day my regular babysitter cancelled and another local girl, Kay, watched the kids. Kay is homeschooled and is in high school. She had been reading with the girls and working on the site words. When I got home, I asked how they did. I mentioned that Zoey was having difficulty catching on with the site words. She said to me, "Kelly do you think Zoey has Dyslexia?" I said, "what?" As I recalled Dyslexia that was turning the words or letters around, right? I tried to

think if Zoey did that. My immediate reaction was - no I do not think so. Kay could see I was contemplating what she said to me.

“The only reason I am telling you this is because I have Dyslexia. That is why I am home schooled,” she said. She added that she noticed that Zoey does some of the same exact things she used to do. She recommended a book, *Dyslexia the Gift*.

started to do research on this to get a better understanding. I could see similarities in the symptoms the teacher was seeing and what I was reading. In the meantime, we had another meeting with Zoey’s teacher. I mentioned the possibility of Dyslexia; it was like I said a dirty four-letter word. She clearly got uncomfortable talking about it. So I didn’t press it. She said that she felt we should have Zoey tested for a learning disability, to find out exactly what is wrong so we would know the best way to teach her. She indicated that we would have to make a written request for the testing to be performed. During the time she spoke with us, it seemed as though she was being very guarded and couldn’t just come out and tell us what she thought. At this point if there was a definition of Dyslexia on the books and awareness amongst teachers, maybe we could have had a candid conversation. I know a teacher cannot make a diagnosis but they should be able to tell parents what they are seeing without fear of losing their jobs. That is why it is important that this bill include more substantive language that includes a definition of dyslexia.

We requested an evaluation for Zoey, it was performed by Meagan Brown the School Psychologist, Don Tobias Speech/Lang, Mrs. Baillargeon her Special Education Teacher. Before we started the testing I told them I had a concern about Dyslexia. Again they all gave me the same reaction, as they exchanged glances amongst themselves. I felt like, what am I missing here? It was very weird. I told them my little brother had Dyslexia, though I didn’t know much about it. They noted my concern and scheduled their testing. When the results came back we had another meeting.

At that meeting, I realized that Zoey would have to be labeled as Special Education to get the help and services she needed. I knew it was the right thing to do, but I got so choked up as I fought back tears it hit me - my child is going to need special education. Her teacher reached out to me and said it’s OK; you’re doing the right thing. They told me I had to sign a form and that they would create an IEP for Zoey. Again, all of this was very unfamiliar to me. I signed the form which included a list of 2 PPT Recommendations. The first sentence was the first step in facing reality. It said that Zoey qualifies for special education services as a student with a Learning Disability. And so the journey for Zoey, her sister and her parents began.

We were at the end of Kindergarten and of course, the next step was first grade. We knew in our hearts that we should put the girls in separate classes. Zoey was so scared of school, she was clinging to Katie. We felt keeping them in the same class would hold Katie back and not be helpful to Zoey. It was difficult but we did it. Zoey was so upset about it. She came home from school and said, “Mommy did you tell them to split us up? Now I am afraid that Katie and I will never be together again.” I looked at her sad little face, she was so upset, and I just couldn’t tell her the truth. She’d never understand. I said no, Zoey, the school separated you. At 5 years old, I felt it was better for her to believe the



school made the decision than to try and explain how her learning disability could adversely affect her sister which she would not have understood and would likely have caused an even greater sense of hopelessness.

I spoke with my Pediatrician who has been a great help to me through this process, Doctor Robert Toscano. He told me to keep very detailed records and ask the school to give me weekly evaluations. He said this way we can tell if the gap is widening or closing. I also spoke to him about getting Zoey tested for Dyslexia. The school would not even speak of it. He thought we should wait a little bit. He suggested continue with the tutoring over the summer.

We hired a second grade teacher to come to our house every day to work with Zoey over the summer so she could maintain the gains she had achieved in Kindergarten. It was this firsthand experience that we could see the full impact of the difficulties Zoey was going through. This teacher was good, but it was like someone was taking Zoey's hands and sticking them in fire. The teacher told us she felt so bad. She tried every trick she knew. She apologized to us saying, I was hoping to have some type of breakthrough." She didn't cash the last week's check we gave her because she felt she had failed. It was at this point that we knew it was a much more serious problem that we had thought. I called my pediatrician and asked him to recommend a good Doctor to do a Neuropsychological Evaluation. He recommended Dr. Isenberg at Connecticut Pediatric Neuropsychology Associates. This was in July 2013; the first appointment we could get with Dr. Isenberg was January 8, 2014.

We just had the evaluation and received the report. We also paid for an extra consultation between Dr. Isenberg and our PPT Team to discuss the results of the report. Dr. Isenberg made a lot of valuable suggestions. We are now at the point where we are trying to get those recommendations incorporated into Zoey's IEP. **It should not be so difficult to implement these recommendations.** But it is and that is the struggle we are going through at this very moment. Please consider adding language to this bill to ensure students get the instruction they need and are entitled to in order to become proficient readers.

Before I close I would like to emphasize how much out of pocket money we have spent to get the right help for Zoey and we are still not there. Insurance has not covered any of this. Fortunately we were able to do this on our own. Many



families may not have the resources to have their child tested since testing is not covered by major health insurance or provide tutoring. Consequently, the child will struggle, possibly fail and not receive the proper training needed to succeed. No child deserves this. This keeps me up at night. We have valuable resources right here in Connecticut at Yale, Haskins Lab, and Literacy How. The research has already been done for us. Let's give the schools and teachers the tools they need to define and understand Dyslexia, provide approved testing and evaluations, and give educators the right tools and training to work with and to provide special curriculum designed for Dyslexic students.

The State Legislation has the power to define the disorder, bring it front and center in the educational system and provide Dyslexic children with the education they so richly deserve. This bill is a good start! I will end here and thank you for your time. Please help these children. They are innocent, they do not want to fail and they have so much potential!

Sincerely yours,

Tim, Kelly Zoey and Katie Howard