

Testimony before Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee

Co-chairs Rep. A. Fleischmann & Sen. A. Stillman

March 17, 2014

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Co-Chairs, and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to testify.

I am here to voice support for Raised House Bill 5562, specifically the provisions to create a subcategory for dyslexia within the specific learning disability category. Additionally, I wish to urge the Committee to go further in your efforts to support students with dyslexia, their parents, and teachers.

As I speak, thousands of students are in classrooms across the state struggling with their studies due to their dyslexia, and the Committee can help them to achieve success in school and beyond.

The need is great. Connecticut today has approximately 21,000 students identified with specific learning disabilities, a little more than 3.5% of your K-12 population. In addition, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 33% of Connecticut's 4th grade students and 23% of Connecticut's 8th grade students are reading below "Basic" skill levels. These results track remarkably close to the National Institutes of Health's research, which shows the incidence of dyslexia among all people in the United States is between 17% and 20%. I want to stress that the Connecticut Longitudinal Study, conducted by Yale Medical School here in New Haven, is the source of the one-in-five incidents rate.

The legislation before you is a good first step, but more can, and should, be done.

Learning Ally has supported students with learning disabilities, blindness and other physical disabilities for more than 65 years. Throughout these decades, our organization, the volunteers and staff, have advocated for an ever-improving educational environment for all students with special needs. As Connecticut proceeds with reforming the education system, we urge you to keep in mind students who have print disabilities including those with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, or who have visual impairments or blindness. We further urge legislators to adopt three policies to improve the educational outcomes for students with learning differences and disabilities: screening for learning disabilities in early elementary grades, expanded teacher training and professional development to better educate students with disabilities, and broader and more reliable access to the educational tools students with disabilities and their educators need. These "Three Pillars" will provide early interventions for students and potentially reduce the need for much more costly interventions later in their academic life.

Pillar I Screening for Learning Disabilities

Every student should be screened for learning disabilities in the early elementary grades, no later than first grade. Early screenings allows for early interventions and better long-term results as students are not forced to fail to be identified. The percentage of students identified can vary widely among local education agencies, as can the specific definition used to determine what constitutes specific learning disability. By instituting a statewide, single standard for screening all students, with a clear evidence-based definition, and further evaluating those individual students who are identified as struggling, Connecticut can improve educational outcomes and close the achievement gap between special education and general education students through earlier and more effective interventions.

Pillar II Teacher Training

The reality is that most students with learning differences can, with appropriate supports and accommodations, succeed in a general education classroom. Today more than three-quarters of students with dyslexia and related disabilities spend two-thirds of their school day in general education classrooms. As a result, more general education teachers will have students with learning disabilities in their classrooms and will need to know how to best integrate their needs. General education and special education are far too often segregated and general education teachers are not trained to work effectively with students with learning differences in their classroom. Through an effective pre-service and in-service teacher training curriculum, general education teachers, while not becoming special education specialist, will develop a greater understanding of how to educate a student with learning disabilities. This greater knowledge can help reduce the need for more costly pullout programs and special education support aides while enhancing a student's educational experience.

Learning Ally has trained teachers on differentiated instruction in a classroom including students with dyslexia and other special education categories; to use assistive technology and accessible materials in the special and general education classrooms; and on dyslexia awareness for more than 10 years. Our experience is clear; teachers who know the facts and science around dyslexia and related disabilities are better able to identify properly a child's situation and to provide the appropriate supports in the classroom. These supports are central to a student's success.

Pillar III Access to the Tools

Identifying students early and preparing teachers to educate students with learning disabilities will make vast improvements for students. Ensuring that every student has access to the right tools is the next step. While federal special education law requires that states and local districts provide students

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with a free and appropriate public education there is no explicit guidance on how to do that. As a result, a patchwork of different approaches and work-arounds exist in most states. The result is a hodge-podge. Learning Ally urges policy makers to simplify and clarify the situation by providing statewide standards and, where most effective, statewide solutions. For example, by creating a statewide source for accessible materials the state ensures a level playing field for all students. Several states, including Massachusetts, Illinois, Indiana, Florida, and Texas have created these statewide solutions, each tailored to the specific needs and nuances of their state's education system. These states realized that relying on each local district to fulfill this fundamental need unintentionally, but invariably, creates gaps. These states have acted to close those gaps, and in a recent review of state annual testing results, these states have seen improved outcomes.

These Three Pillars will support a great improvement in the education outcomes for Connecticut's students—early and universal screening, broad training of teachers both in-service professional development and expanded pre-services requirements; and improved access to evidence-based tools, accommodations and interventions. I urge the Committee to pass the provision before you in HB 5562, and to proceed on to adopt these proven strategies that will yield positive results for the tens of thousands of Connecticut's students who struggle today as a result of their dyslexia.

Thank you for your time and attention.