

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Erin Holden and I am a UConn Senior, pursuing Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Elementary Education through the Neag School of Education's Integrated Bachelor's/Master's program. I am also President of UConn Future Educators, a branch of the CT Education Association Student Program. I wanted to write to you today concerning Senate Bill No. 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia. I wholeheartedly support this bill, but respectfully ask that additional supports be included.

I have taken four semester's worth of education classes. Topics have ranged from assessment and educational psychology to classroom and behavior management. One of my other required classes was entitled "Exceptionality," which discussed students with disabilities and teaching strategies for these students. This class, which met for about an hour once a week, is the only special education class that I've taken in two years. We spent about two weeks (so about four hours) on learning disabilities. Dyslexia was mentioned once. How is it that a disability that is so prevalent in our society is only talked about once, and in passing?

I've had plenty of coursework in literacy skills and processes that reflect best practices in reading and writing. We've discussed that as teachers, we have to decide what will work in our classrooms depending on grade, ability level and student population. We have to know what our kids can and cannot do, and for the things they cannot do, we have to figure out how to help them. As a result of these classes, I have so many great ideas surrounding reading and writing instruction that I can't wait to implement in my future classroom. But while these courses and discussions were great, not one of those conversations consisted of how to support students with dyslexia within these best practices. So while I may have the perfect idea for a research project on natural disasters, what does that mean for the student who can't read because he can't decode words or the student who has difficulty with written expression? Do I just plow through that project, leaving these students with dyslexia to fend for themselves, because I have never received training on how to help them?

We have never discussed the detection and recognition of dyslexia in class. We have never discussed evidence-based interventions for students with dyslexia. In two years of higher education classes, in a highly respected teacher prep program, we have never really discussed dyslexia. This was never more evident than in my literacy class this past semester when we were each tasked to present to the class an independent literacy project. I chose to write a research paper on dyslexia. I spent a few minutes talking to my fellow pre-service teachers, explaining what dyslexia is and some sample interventions. Following my presentation, I had several of my classmates come up and tell me that they had no idea what dyslexia actually was before I spoke. They thought it was just students flipping letters and there was really nothing to do to help them

besides showing them the correct ways to write letters. They were amazed that so many students are believed to have dyslexia yet very little is being done to support them at school. This happened at the end of the semester, after we had had over 40 hours on literacy best practices.

This whole scenario shows that teachers, specifically pre-service teachers, acknowledge that there is a gap in our learning. We want to know how to support all of our students, regardless of their ability. But how can we do that, when we are not being taught how? How can we as teachers support students with dyslexia if most teachers don't even know what dyslexia is? This needs to change and SB 1054 can help to achieve that goal.

I've been an advocate for dyslexia for the past few years. And while I have always thought these reforms were important, it has never become more evident until I began student teaching in Windham this year.

I have several students in my class who I believe have dyslexia (they display many of the classic signs), but when I looked at their IEP's, they were only classified as having a learning disability-no specifics. As a result, they are not getting the services and interventions they need. If they had access to these interventions and support, school and learning could be a much more enjoyable experience for them and we could see the growth that they desperately need. When I brought this up to other teachers in the school, most of them had no idea what I was talking about or even worse, didn't realize that there are evidence-based interventions for students with dyslexia. A few of them honestly just thought that they were hopeless causes.

This has to change and we can make that happen.

By approving SB No. 1054, we can do a world of wonder for students with dyslexia. We can develop and include a universal definition of dyslexia, require a Department of Education employee to be responsible for providing the public with assistance and information about dyslexia, and most importantly, train the people who will be interacting most directly with the students with dyslexia—the teachers. Opportunities need to be provided for both pre-service and in-service teachers to learn about dyslexia. It is crucial these conversations start to take place in teacher preparation programs and continue in professional development trainings for in-service teachers. We need to increase the awareness of dyslexia so all students have access to early identification and appropriate interventions.

We have a chance to make a difference here. Please support SB No. 1054.

Thank you,

Erin Holden
Durham, CT