

To the Chair and Members of the Education Committee:

I appreciate this opportunity to express my support for Senate Bill No 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia. I am a retired special education teacher and a parent advocate for appropriate educational plans for students with special needs.

When I started teaching, I quickly realized I did not know how to teach reading to my class of 14 students with a variety of learning needs. I followed the instructor's manual carefully but my students "didn't get it." Listening to their attempts to read orally, I realized some of them could not sound out words. I found phonetic resources to teach sounds of letters but it was a haphazard approach.

That summer, I took a 2 week course on the Orton-Gillingham approach to reading instruction. My eyes were opened. I learned about the structure of the English language, which is actually about 89% decodable if you know the structure, and how to analyze a word. I was fascinated because although I was an avid reader and excellent speller, I had no idea what the rules were. I had been born with a brain neurologically wired to effortlessly make the connections of sound to print intuitively.

Persons with dyslexia must receive explicit instruction in the name, sound and shape of each letter. They must receive direct instruction in the patterns of the six syllable types in order to predict vowel sounds. They need repeated practice in reading decodable words, phrases and text with fluency. The instruction must be delivered with enthusiasm and intensity and fidelity. All the while the teacher is helping the student understand how and why English became the universal language. Lessons are presented visually and auditorily. Writing must be the third sense involved in every aspect of the instruction.

Funny thing is, all children would benefit from knowing the rules which govern their native tongue. The 20% with dyslexia will not learn to read without it.

Explicit, direct reading instruction for a student with dyslexia is intense. No one is able to deliver this instruction without extensive training themselves. Sadly, institutions of higher education currently do not offer future teachers this opportunity. Reading is assumed to be natural. Quite the contrary, listening and speaking are natural to all humans, but reading and writing are man-made constructs. Teachers are taught that comprehension is the be all and end all of reading. Absolutely! But if a child cannot read – i.e. decode – the words, comprehension is not even an option. A child with dyslexia needs this instruction early and intensely while the neurology of the brain is most flexible, by 3rd or 4th grade.

Too many children with dyslexia are misunderstood by their teachers. They become discouraged by the litany of phrases they hear almost daily: "You're not trying." "You knew that yesterday." "What's the matter with you?" "You're lazy." "You're not using your strategies." "Hurry up." The problem lies not with the teacher nor the student. The problem resides in the inability of teachers to recognize the signs of dyslexia because they have not been trained. And the student is who he was made to be. For too long, instruction in phonics and language basics has been relegated to drill and kill, boring, unmotivating activities. Not if you are drowning in a sea of letters and sounds.

What must Connecticut do to become a state of readers and lower the achievement gap?

1. Define dyslexia.
2. Develop an assessment protocol to distinguish dyslexia from other reading and learning disabilities.

3. Train teachers – current and pre-service – in how dyslexia manifests in the early stages of reading acquisition.
4. Mandate teacher training institutions to offer courses in the history of the English language, analysis of the structure of our language, techniques for making learning of the basics interesting and exciting.
5. Mandate professional development for current teachers in the above elements of language instruction.

Thank you for time and commitment to improving instruction for students with dyslexia.

Harriet R. Clark
107 Sycamore Drive
Prospect, CT 06712-1490
203 528 4109
h.clark107@yhoo.com
March 11, 2015