

Written Testimony in support of (and requesting additions to) SB 1054: An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia

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Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you. I am lucky to have the dual perspective of both parent and literacy specialist. I feel that it gives me a unique view into the issue of dyslexia in Connecticut. I am asking you to please strongly support SB 1054 with the addition of requiring districts to have screening in place to identify students who may be dyslexic and benefit from specific research-based reading instruction. It is an investment in our future.

My son is 10 years old. He is athletic, smart, funny, sensitive and can build anything. He is also dyslexic. It does not define him, but it does affect his daily life. He has to work harder to make honor roll and gets upset when he doesn't get a good grade; he doesn't enjoy reading, but loves to learn new things. He has difficulty copying down his homework, organizing his notebook and writing reports. He does not like to read aloud or speak in front of groups because sometimes he has trouble getting out what he wants to say. But each year, he is getting better at compensating for his weaknesses and capitalizing on his strengths. In my testimony last year, I shared the difficult time we had getting my son identified. His diagnosis came after over \$1000 cost for private educational/psychological testing. Without that private testing, his school would have continued to tell me that he was doing "average" and they didn't see the difficulties I did. He just needed to read more at home they said, and they meant well. Luckily, being a teacher of literacy I recognized his struggles at home. I wish I could say that I knew right away what may be wrong, because after all I was a teacher. I should have been trained in all of this. But I didn't know. I tried practicing sight words more often, and continued reading with him at night. He continued to struggle, but was able to hide many of his difficulties in school. My insistence that there was a problem and ability to get him tested privately allowed my son to at least get a 504, because at the time there was no dyslexia box on the IEP. He qualified for a 504 because of a related condition, a visual perceptual disorder (not a cause of dyslexia, but often concurrent condition). But still, I wish I had known sooner. The earlier dyslexia is caught, the better chance we have of building new connections in the brain, not to mention easing the anxiety and shame that can come from struggling to read.

So, why didn't I know more? Because I wasn't taught in my pre-service education. Everything I've learned about dyslexia, I've had to seek out on my own. And I had to educate my son's teachers and school. And I'm a teacher. What about all the parents who don't know when there is a problem with their child's reading? In my work now, I see students frequently that remind me of my son. But they are not identified, either because people missed the signs or didn't know how to determine if dyslexia was the issue and how to provide effective intervention. These students are out there. And like my son, they are bright, creative and have a lot to offer. We can all google "famous dyslexics" and find inventors, business leaders and politicians. Luckily someone was there to make sure they succeeded despite their dyslexia. I wonder how many innovative inventors, business leaders and dynamic politicians we have lost because we failed them as children. How many of them felt like failures at school and not smart enough simply because we failed to understand and treat their different brain?

Teachers need to know what dyslexia is and learn to spot early warning signs. They need pre-service preparation and on-going professional development once in the field to identify these students. They need to be trained on how to provide effective reading instruction, including explicit phonics instruction, so that they can provide intervention at the early stages for struggling students. For some students,

using research-based instruction in reading will be enough for them. However, if a student does not respond to effective, explicit instruction, we need to delve deeper. In order to do that, we need trained professionals that can screen, and when appropriate, diagnose students with dyslexia. Until we start being able to identify the 1 in 5 out there whose brains aren't wired in a way that makes reading easy, we can't support them the way they need to be supported and taught. And we risk losing out on all of the strengths they have to offer the world, simply because they struggle to learn in our current school environment.

I am grateful that my son's dyslexia is not more severe. Yes, he struggles at times, but he's come so far. He can read and he is gaining confidence. Dyslexia doesn't go away, but it can be helped. My son no longer feels like he "can't" and I believe he has a bright future ahead of him. Not all children are as lucky.

I am asking you to please strongly support SB 1054 with the addition of requiring districts to have screening in place to identify students who may be dyslexic and benefit from specific research-based reading instruction. It is an investment in our future.