

March 9, 2015

Dear CT Education Committee,

I support SB 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia but am requesting additional supports be added to the bill.

My son William was a toddler who could only be described as happy and full of life. The world was full of wonder, and he greeted every day with a sense of curiosity and optimism. Preschool provided a rich opportunity for him to explore his imagination and discuss his many interests. As a former elementary school teacher, it was very rewarding to see my son thrive in such a nurturing environment. I was confident that he had all the tools and potential to expand as a learner as he approached his transition to elementary school. Nothing could have prepared me for the changes that were about to take place.

William woke every morning excited to go to Kindergarten. We became perplexed when he started complaining to the teacher and nurse about headaches and stomachaches as the year progressed. We also noticed that he began to struggle with letters, colors and even shapes. He didn't know the days of the week or the months of the year. As the literacy demands increased, so did the stomachaches, and each school day delivered home an exhausted and teary boy. As an educator, I was confident that with some extra practice and attention from me...we'd have William back up to speed. He never caught up and the divide only got worse.

When he continued to struggle, I asked the school if he might have dyslexia. I was assured that it was impossible because he was so smart (as though the two are mutually exclusive). As his struggles in reading and writing increased, we saw a drop in confidence. What troubled us the most was the fact that our once happy, social boy was becoming withdrawn and began to isolate from many of his friends. By the time he finished second grade, he was showing signs of anger and frustration every day. He avoided homework and resented any attempts by us to work with him.

We had him tested by a neuropsychologist and it was recommended that he receive special education services for a specific learning disability in reading. The school concluded that he didn't qualify and suggested RTI instead. As his experience continued to deteriorate, we decided to pull him out and homeschool him. He was enrolled in an intensive Lindamood Bell program and got some relief from all the pressure at school. We noticed that he started to feel better and regained some stamina to help him reenter school the following year.

By the time William was preparing to enter fourth grade, we had him retested, and he was diagnosed with dyslexia. By this point, he was showing more of the classic symptoms, and we were confident that he would finally receive special education services and specialized instruction for dyslexic learners. It was devastating to realize that once again he would not qualify and furthermore, we learned that the school had no one qualified to teach the methods recommended in our private evaluation. Their solution was to offer extra time on tests and preferential seating through a 504 Plan. They were confident that this would suffice as long as William would try harder to focus on his comprehension and writing. It was emphasized that his testing showed how intelligent he is, and once again I felt as though this was being used to deny him the type of instruction he needed.

As we approach the end of fifth grade, I am extremely proud of my son. He has mediocre grades at best, but I am amazed at the way he has persevered throughout the many years of an educational approach that excludes the way he learns. It hurts me deeply to know that his elementary school years have been filled with self doubt, shame and frustration, rather than the wonderful memories held by many people such as myself. It is with heavy hearts that we are removing him from public education to pursue a private education geared toward children with dyslexia. I feel betrayed by the public system that I have held dear throughout my life as both a student and eventually a public school teacher. I realize now that I was ill prepared to teach dyslexic students because there was no emphasis on detection or intervention in my training.

Through countless resources, it is certain that a wealth of information surrounding dyslexia is available, but the public education system needs to catch up and make it a priority. Dyslexia can be viewed as a gift, but it will never be opened if these students are not identified and taught with methods that work for them. For every famous dyslexic, there are countless others who missed the opportunity because their public schools failed them. As a parent of a dyslexic child and an educator who believes in an appropriate education for every child, I think the time has come to stop making excuses and do the right thing.

My son is on a new path that will allow him to reach his potential. He has spent an exhausting amount of time and effort, and we have spent tens of thousands of dollars for testing, specialized tutoring, and now tuition. I have had hundreds of conversations with other parents facing similar dilemmas with their dyslexic children. It is now time for public schools to step up and make a commitment to teach students with dyslexia with research-based methods that work. Until then, dyslexia will remain an educational anchor for too many children.

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