

March 6, 2015

Dear Committee,

My testimony is in support of SB 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia. Additional stronger mandates need to be established to Dyslexia law.

Imagine a child the spitting image of Shirley Temple skipping into kindergarten with a Catholic school plaid jumper dress and flowered headband. She is effervescent and filled with promise. She is me; Carina Borgia. Everyday in Kindergarten, a child is specially chosen and their name is written on the blackboard. I don't even remember why because that's not the important part of this particular memory. "I can't wait for it to be my day," she delights. "Carina, come up here. Stand in front of the board. Do you see those letters? What do they say?" says the teacher. "I don't know," I say. I look down at my special shoes mommy got me from Buster Browns on 86th Street in Brooklyn, NY. A new feeling I've never experienced in my short five years distresses me. I'm feeling embarrassment for the very first time in my life. I want my mom. I'll think of mom. "Carina look harder. C'mon. What do those letters say? Read the word Carina. This is *soooo* easy Carina," says the teacher. "It's your name Carina!" shouts precocious annoyed male student. The class seems to fill with laughter and my time as the class victim has begun. The erosion of my ability to take risks and believe in myself has started.

My name is Carina Drake and I'm dyslexic. Dr. Esabella Rapin at Albert Einstein School of medicine made my diagnosis. I was remediated 20 years ago by an Orton Gillingham Fellow; the highest standard awarded by Orton Academy. I received evidenced based targeted instruction through this method. My experience was heartbreaking in early elementary school. School is the first institution we enter without our parents. I failed the first time I stepped off my Brooklyn stoop into the "real world" of school and I landed hard face first on the concrete. In a hard place like Brooklyn, New York in the late 1980s, I was the classroom victim. My heart filled with darkness. I wasn't invited to birthday parties. I was the "stupid" child in the class. My teachers deemed me "lazy". I was told to work harder. "Just try harder! Look at the words harder! You're not trying hard enough!" When I went to a new school set up for

Dyslexic students I met Sr. Margret, I realized I had just met the person who would save me from my isolation of illiteracy. Through Orton Gillingham instruction she broke down the written word and she taught me how to read. She taught me, the student the department of education told my mother was unreachable, to read. I had friends for the first time. I was happy and literate. I was completely mainstreamed in two years and needed only accommodations like extended time and distraction free testing for the remainder of my academic life. I was enchanted when I could finally open a book to meet Matilda, Charlotte, Atticus Finch, and Pippi Long stocking. I read everything and learned to love reading. I practically lived at the Brooklyn public library “down the block.” I was recruited to NYU’s nursing program and received their prestigious Helene Fuld leadership scholarship. I’ve saved lives and nurtured the sick. I am most proud that I can read my daughter Green Eggs and Ham like every other parent because of Sr. Margret. I write this testimony to serve educators like Sister getting the support they need in teaching all children to read.

As a dyslexic adult, I still deal with the symptoms of dyslexia everyday. I thought about how I could illustrate what it feels like to be dyslexic or define it for you in a clear way. Imagine that every time you had to read, communicate, or read directions they were in old English. Depending on your intelligence you might pick some of what was being said around you or read in print. However, you would have to reread quite a bit. If you had to write in old English it would take you more time to decipher how to write those words. You would spend some time thinking about the order of your words and it simply would not feel natural for you. You would be very frustrated. Now, that is how dyslexics feel everyday in the world of academia.

My daughter is in the Ridgefield, Connecticut public schools with the diagnosis of dyslexia, AD/HD, and a language disorder (auditory progressing disorder). The district refused to evaluate her and kept her in the RTI model for an entire school year since my last testimony. The legislation last year was not strong enough! My child suffered! We need stronger legislation. RTI is not supposed to be used to deny or delay an evaluation but in this state that is being done regularly to avoid labeling dyslexic children and therefore avoid paying for remediation. ItI’m asking that you make it a state law that RTI cannot be used to deny or delay an evaluation of a child showing dyslexia symptoms. I

had to take my daughter to Lindamood Bell last summer when she failed to meet state literacy goals and was a non-reader exiting kindergarten. We paid \$7,500.00 for 3 weeks of the recommended six weeks of remediation for our daughter. I could not afford the entire program they recommended but paid for what I could. It was a great program for my daughter but at a tremendous cost at \$2,500.00 per week. After the district would not give my daughter appropriate instruction or an evaluation, I threatened our school with “failure to find” laws and got a private evaluation. We paid another \$6,000.00 for that Yale private evaluation. Only then did the district provide us with an evaluation 1 month prior to my evaluation. I can’t afford this rate of expenditures. I emotionally am suffering while fighting this battle again in my lifetime. My daughter will struggle further emotionally if I do not fight. What is a family of lower socioeconomic status to do? It’s not fair and this needs to be illegal.

My daughter has school anxiety at just 7 years old. She has a negative and anxious script regarding herself. With the “race to the top culture,” my child with specific learning disabilities has been demoralized in your state due to your inability to properly find and educate her. I had to fight for her to have APPROPRIATE evidence based practice reading help. Throughout the 2013-2014 academic year as Kiara was placed in the RTI model. RTI is not special education. It is not evidence based best practice for a child with a suspected learning disability to be remediated. A child who can not decode, recognize print, understand 1:1 correspondence, has little to no fluency, and plain can not learn the concepts of reading despite proper instruction should have been grounds for evaluation. When I asked repeatedly for Ridgefield Public Schools to help me evaluate my daughter and start appropriate evidence based reading program, I was told “no.” I was told my daughter did not show signs of a learning disability. I was told my daughter’s miniscule progress was enough. I was told the state only mandates the school show “progress.” I was told that she had to go through RTI which is a lie. I was told her overt symptoms of dyslexia were “developmental.” I was treated disrespectfully and my input was not taken into account. This disregard was not in the spirit of IDEA law (parent involvement) but without a learning disability label I was not protected by IDEA though my daughter had 3 undiagnosed learning disabilities at the time. I was told she had no

right to an evaluation. I was told by the former principle, “Your daughter does not have dyslexia. Dyslexic students do not progress.”

We have to mandate in our state that district administrations can not simply use the word “progress” subjectively to deny access to evaluations, deny special education, keep children in the RTI model that won’t work, change IEPs, and overall preventing the appropriate practice in teaching dyslexic children literacy any longer. We need to clearly define that “meaningful progress” is “bridging the gap between dyslexic learning disabled children and the state goals.” We cannot allow “progress” to be loosely and unilaterally interpreted so districts can deny dyslexic learning disabled children their right to a “free and appropriate” education in an appropriate program as entitled to them under IDEA law. This is vital and cost effective for all involved. 1 in 5 children are dyslexics. 50% of Connecticut inmates are dyslexic. Think of how much we are already spending on this disability that would be better spent properly educating all children through early literacy!

Our daughter received remediation everyday in her public school but not by a certified instructor to give the reading program. Essentially, a district buys a program and materials and gives it to their special education teachers to administer with little training. The programs are implemented without fidelity. Orton Gillingham Academy and all other evidence based programming intend for their interventions to be administered by certified professionals. We need legislation that requires the implementation of dyslexia remediation programs to be evidence based best practice by certified instructors. There can be no ambiguity about this mandate.

Every child in Connecticut should have the opportunity to learn how to read. Every Kindergarten and first grade teacher should be trained to identify the signs of dyslexia. They should be encouraged to refer that child to special education. When dyslexia interventions start in Kindergarten and first grade 90% are successful readers by third grade. This aligns directly with the requirements of the state literacy laws. All teachers of Kindergarten and first grade need to be trained to identify dyslexia and mandated to refer dyslexic children to special education.

Carina Drake

16 Bayberry Hill Road

Ridgefield, CT 06877

cdrake10@mac.com

(H) 203-403-5046