March 10, 2015

RE: RAISED BILL NO. 1054
AN ACT CONCERNING STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

Testimony of Diane Willcutts

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This testimony is in support of Raised Bill No. 1054.

Thank you to the Education Committee for raising a bill that can bring us another step closer to enabling our educators to effectively instruct students with dyslexia. Currently, this is not occurring in most of our public schools.

I am a parent of a child with dyslexia, an education advocate who has worked for more than 12 years on behalf of children with dyslexia, and the former president of the Learning Disabilities Association of Connecticut.

Many people wrongly assume that students with dyslexia cannot become good readers. I am lucky to have been involved with many success stories, and I know what a difference the right instruction from a properly trained teacher can make. Right now, most teachers have little to no training in dyslexia, and it is not surprising that many teachers respond to students with dyslexia by viewing them as lazy or simply not motivated to read, rather than providing them with appropriate instruction.

When my son was 5, he struggled with learning the alphabet, with learning letter sounds, and with rhyming. These are classic warning signs of dyslexia. His well-intentioned teacher said this was developmental and, even if it wasn't, we couldn't diagnose a learning disability at such a young age. She was wrong.

As a professional advocate, I knew to ask the district to evaluate my son, but unfortunately, the school staff did not understand dyslexia, did insufficient testing, and insisted there were no problems. My son was struggling and hated school, so I sought outside help and then learned that my son had dyslexia. The school agreed to provide special education for him, but staff—although most had master's degrees--didn't understand the science of reading and didn't know how to teach him. And so I found a private educational therapist who did, which cost my family thousands of dollars. The money we spent was well worth it, though-- my son's reading is completely remediated. By the time he was 11, his teachers told me that their main concern was getting him to STOP reading when he was supposed to be doing other assignments.

I was lucky that I had the knowledge and resources to help my son. But how many parents do not? Reading is the key to everything in our society. Students who cannot read are at high risk

of developing mental health problems, of dropping out of school, and of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. Not teaching a child to read well has a very high cost to society.

Bill No. 1054 takes small but necessary steps to enable our teachers to identify and to remediate dyslexia. I recommend one change. In Section 1, it currently says, "For purposes of this section, 'dyslexia' has the same meaning as provided in the Department of Education IEP Manual and Forms, revised January 2015, as amended from time to time."

To facilitate immediate understanding, the statute should directly state the definition of dyslexia, as generally described in the IEP Manual, which is "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability (SLD), which impacts reading--specifically phonological processing, decoding, and/or fluent word recognition and spelling. Dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and is unexpected and/or inconsistent with a student's other abilities despite the provision of appropriate instruction."

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments on this bill. If you have any questions, please call or email me.