

My name is Erin Wood and I live in Southington. I am a parent of two dyslexic boys aged 10 and 8. I am in support of SB 1054: An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia and respectfully request that additional supports be added to the bill to include early assessment of dyslexic students and implementation of appropriate interventions. I would like to share with you the story of my oldest son to illustrate the importance of early intervention and evidence based interventions.

This is our story

“Mom, am I stupid?”

The first time my oldest son, Owen, asked me this question he was 6 years old and in Kindergarten. As a parent, this statement was devastating. This child could explain all the working parts of a locomotive engine at the age of three. He had the vocabulary of a third grader and could comprehend any text read to him. He had a way of thinking about things and doing things that I, as an adult, could never even imagine. But...he knew he couldn't read like the other children and he knew school was hard. He knew he was different. When Owen was 7, the first grade teacher told us there was something strange about the way Owen was learning to read. He told us Owen was not reading on a level he should be. When we asked for a PPT meeting, the teacher changed his tune and told us Owen was progressing well and there were no problems. This was the beginning of the pattern. The teacher would be concerned, we would request testing, a meeting would be held and it would be determined that everything was fine. Owen is smart, they would tell us.

“Mom, why do my teachers lie to me? They always tell me I'm a good reader, but I can't read!”

By second grade, my son's anxiety had increased. He was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and the professionals told us his anxiety was 100% school driven. He was reading two years below grade level, but still the school denied testing. The principal told us “If I could give an IEP to every student that is a little nervous about school, I would.” In third grade, my son was reading at a beginning of first grade reading level. It took three more requests for testing, thousands of dollars in advocacy fees, and a devastating emotional impact on my son before the school agreed to test. Once they tested, we asked the question: Is my son dyslexic?” The response was an astounding “NO!” They used excuses such as “Owen was tired on the day we did that test.” and “This test is more of a visual test and we know Owen doesn't excel at that.” After more advocating, we pushed the District to pay for outside testing. The outside testing had the same exact results as the District's, but the evaluator told us that, without a doubt, our son was a textbook dyslexic.

“You mean I'm not dumb? There's a name for why I can't read?”

The school wrote an IEP and the special education teacher informed us that although she was not trained in the specific program, she could “follow the teacher's manual.” Our son made no progress. His emotional state declined. At the end of third grade, we filed a Child Find complaint with the State of Connecticut. At a resolution meeting, the District agreed to move our son to a school with a teacher certified in the Wilson reading program. We dropped the complaint. Four years had been wasted and my son was now three years below grade level.

“Mom, my new teacher says I'm smart. He says I'm just dyslexic and we need to work around that! He says he can teach me to read.”

In fourth grade, Owen had a special education teacher that had been trained in dyslexia and was certified in the Wilson reading program. In just 6 weeks of instruction with this teacher, Owen had jumped up from a first grade reading level to a third grade reading level. You see, this teacher understood the nuances of the dyslexic brain. He also taught my son how his brain works and gave him a newfound confidence. Owen excelled that year and was brought up to grade level by December!

“Mom, why doesn’t my new teacher understand me like my old one did?”

Unfortunately, Owen’s special education teacher left the District for Owen’s fifth grade year – this year. Owen was placed with a special education teacher that has no training in dyslexia. Owen is currently falling behind and the downward slope is, again beginning.

The statistics say that 1 in 5 are dyslexic. I have two dyslexic children in my house. One that got help too late and one that got help in time. One that struggles with anxiety and depression and one that does not. The consequences of not identifying these children early can be dire.

The dyslexia checkbox on the IEP form is an amazing accomplishment, but it does nothing when educators are not trained to identify the signs of dyslexia. In the four years that we fought for my son in Southington, only one teacher verbalized to us that something was wrong with the way Owen was learning to read. This year, when the dyslexia box was added to the IEP, we requested that it be checked off for Owen. Our special education teacher knew nothing of the new addition and had to research it. We still have not been able to get the checkbox on my youngest son’s IEP because he is identified as specific learning disability in reading. Teachers need to be better trained and more aware of dyslexia. If teachers can’t recognize dyslexia, what good is the checkbox on the IEP?

Teachers also need to be trained in evidence based intervention methods. For our son, the difference between a teacher trained in intervention and not trained in intervention, was the difference between success and failure. Just following the manual, or watching a trained teacher in action is not enough. In our school District, when requesting a teacher certified in the Wilson reading program, we were told there were 4 teachers who were certified. There are 8 elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school in Southington. It is fact that many children are slipping through the cracks and are not being instructed properly.

My hope is that every dyslexic child will find success and will come home and tell their parent, “My teacher says I’m smart. My brain just works differently and I can learn.”

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Erin Wood