

I am writing in support of Senate Bill 1054, an Act concerning students with dyslexia. My name is Greg Weingart, a parent from Harwinton Connecticut. I am requesting changes to this bill to include early screening, identification, and appropriate interventions for dyslexia.

I am dyslexic. My son is dyslexic. My father and many other members of my family are dyslexic.

The day after we brought our newborn son home from the hospital, I bought him a book; perhaps if we started reading to him early he wouldn't have to struggle in school as I did. Maybe he wouldn't need Special Education services like I did. Every night we would read together. He loved books and stories; reading was a special time for our family.

When he entered Kindergarten, my wife and I shared his family history of dyslexia with his teacher. I asked her to keep an eye out for any concerns that would suggest he might be dyslexic too. We didn't know that dyslexia wasn't a recognized disability. He was not a good reader but squeaked by. His teacher didn't have the training to recognize his symptoms, and suggested that we needed to spend more time reading with him. She meant well, but her insulting suggestion still stung, and it didn't help my son.

Off to summer school he went, but there wasn't much improvement because the program was not designed for dyslexics. First grade was a mirror of kindergarten; he worked hard and got by. Again he was happy for summer school and the chance to be a better reader, but it really didn't help. Finally, in second grade, his teacher referred him for a Special Education evaluation. To the referring teacher's horror, he didn't qualify; she had been so certain.

We did get some good news though. They said he was "smart and could figure it out." We foolishly left that PPT happy that he was smart, happy that he wasn't disabled. But still, there were a couple of problems. He was beginning to scam his teachers with answers that he knew were wrong, and more importantly, he couldn't read. He was giving up.

We'd seen advertisements for Sylvan Learning centers. \$6,000 later, his reading was improving and he was happy that he could read. But unable to afford to continue with Sylvan, we began researching our options. Maybe we could have him reevaluated; no, that would suggest that we didn't trust the school. We checked with our medical insurance; no, they didn't cover learning disabilities. But isn't dyslexia a physical difference of the brain? We just needed a diagnosis.

We talked to everyone who would listen. Finally, a friend who was studying to become a special education teacher suggested that perhaps the school needed to perform additional tests. But the Special Education assessments seemed to be so thorough. How could we challenge those teachers who seemed to be so well meaning, those same teachers who had so much influence in our son's life? How could we tell them they were wrong?

Instead my wife began tutoring him with an Orton-Gillingham based approach for reading. This methodical approach covers every rule for reading and writing. Each word is dissected and

analyzed. This method has been proven effective for dyslexics, and we began to see real progress. Every day he worked with his mother, he wanted to be able to read.

Meanwhile, contrary to the approach we were using, the school was recommending that he guess at words he didn't know. Well, he was such a terrible guesser, that the meaning of a story could be completely altered. We decided to home school him in reading so that the school would stop using inappropriate methods with him. Instead they asked to reevaluate him for Special Education. Only a year had passed since the first evaluation. How could the results be any different if the assessments were properly performed the first time?

This time we brought a parent advocate from SpEd Connecticut to the meeting and requested additional tests. As you can imagine, he was identified as having "a specific learning disability." (The word dyslexia was still taboo.) The school district even had six teachers who were specially trained to teach Wilson, an Orton-Gillingham approach. We were thrilled--finally, an appropriate education for our son.

But the battles were just beginning.

During third grade the school scheduled his Wilson tutoring sessions during science period. How was he to learn science if he missed the class? How could he pass the quizzes? Wasn't there a more appropriate time? Wasn't it obvious and why did I need to ask?

One teacher asked how he was identified for special education. I was amazed that she was not aware of the signs. All along, I had been relying on his teachers to tell me. Up to 20 percent of the population has some degree of dyslexia. Why didn't she know the signs? Apparently no one had taught her.

By third grade, my son's reading level was far behind that of his classmates; he needed to catch up. We knew that he would have a hard time in other subjects too. Tutoring during the summer seemed like a great option, but we were told that it was only to maintain skills and not for advancing. Why would we spend valuable resources only to maintain skills, if the same level of effort could be used to advance?

With the guidance of our SpEd advocate, we disagreed with the school and stood our ground, no longer willing to accept the school's interpretation of what was appropriate. He attended summer tutoring to advance in the program, but complained when the tutor rounded out his hour-long sessions with coloring. He was disappointed because he had sacrificed his playtime to learn, not color. Years later, yet another teacher complained that the lessons were boring and wandered the halls during their time. My son complained again, knowing that these lessons were his best hope for success. By now he knew that he wanted to be an engineer and would need to go to college. He completed the Wilson program in eighth grade, ready to focus on his next challenge, writing. He was still far behind his peers.

My son is a junior in high school this year. That first special education assessment was right about one thing, he is smart. But, he is disabled. His brain is different. Like a person who still doesn't have 20/20 vision even with eyeglasses, his use of technology to read and write only takes him so far. This year he has an amazing Special Education teacher. She understands that he is different and is teaching him ways to cope without sacrificing his learning along the way. Without some amazing teachers and the help of a SpEd Connecticut advocate, my son would not currently be researching engineering schools. We didn't know what he needed and the school wasn't always telling us what was available. Through an advocate's guidance my son received the accommodations he needed to learn, such as extended time for assignments and assessments, a laptop with voice dictation and book reader software, class notes, study guides, the use of a calculator in class, and various other accommodations. Not all parents and dyslexic students have been this lucky.

At times however, it has seemed like our son's teachers were either unable or unwilling to implement his IEP. One special education teacher wouldn't give him class notes and only provided blank study guides. She expected him to accurately complete the study guides without class notes, and he couldn't read his own writing. She insisted that it was the best way to prepare him for college, but actually, she kept him from learning. Eventually we got the class notes he needed by writing a letter to the schools administration.

My son takes tests and quizzes in class with his peers but finishes them at a later time. On a few of these occasions, one of his teachers asked him to leave the room so that she could discuss the quiz with the class. While he wandered the hall waiting to be called back into the room, he missed out on valuable teaching that his peers were able to apply during the upcoming final exam.

I could go on and on with stories about teachers who meant well but negatively impacted my son's education. I have just as many stories about the wonderful teachers, administrators and advocates who have poured their hearts into his education. I thank these individuals. Because of them, my son is preparing for college and a career. I ask that you consult with these wonderful individuals as you prepare your legislation regarding dyslexia. My hope is that this legislation includes specific standards for the early identification, training for teachers, and appropriate education for dyslexics. Only with an appropriate education will dyslexic students' real talents shine and benefit the state with their contributions.

Thank You.

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