

From:
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I am writing in support of Senate Bill 1054, An Act Concerning Students with Dyslexia. I respectfully request that language be added to provide for early assessments and evidence-based interventions provided by trained specialists.

My son, Ben was finally diagnosed at the end of his 4th-grade year as unable to read at the age of 10, a “classic dyslexic,” following a protracted battle with the Westport school system that enabled me finally to obtain an outside evaluation. The school system’s failure to provide a timely, appropriate evaluation and research-based instruction for his first four years in elementary school had far-reaching consequences both for him and for me.

Ben was finally given research-based instruction in the 5th grade and began to learn to read, slowly and with great difficulty. Middle school was so painful for him and so overwhelming also for me, that I left my career in publishing in order to launch Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, a non-profit organization, in 2000. This organization currently provides information on how to access appropriate help, and educates parents about these kids’ noteworthy abilities, generally neither recognized nor developed in schools: Abilities that can serve as a pathway to their success as adults, as well as helping overcome their difficulties in school. Parents across the country are able to access this comprehensive information via a free e-newsletter and web resources at www.SmartKidswithLD.org.

In the 15 years since launching Smart Kids with LD, I have spoken to hundreds of families whose children also struggle to learn to read, write, remember math facts, or the correct order of days of the week. Many of their children, who were seen as “not college material,” have succeeded in going on to college through their parents’ dogged efforts, and their own hard work.

But many children who are fully capable of learning and becoming productive and successful adults continue to be lost because of our failure to provide early diagnosis of dyslexia and research-based instruction. Their inability to learn what the children around them are learning in the absence of research-based instruction, undermines their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy: The emotional toll can be more devastating than the disability itself.

In addition to greatly benefitting these students, early intervention is far less costly for schools and communities. There are enormous societal costs to delaying the identification and remedial process, including homelessness, incarceration, and substance abuse.

My son's dogged determination to learn and to prove that he is not dumb, along with the outside-of-school evaluation, tutoring, therapy, and private high school education we were able to provide him with, took him to Bowdoin College, and eventually to the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, although he was rarely able to take a full load of courses. Now 28, he is a New York-based architect at Gensler, the largest architectural firm in the U.S.

But like many kids with dyslexia, he had grown to hate school. His teachers often seemed not to expect much of him, or believed he was just making their lives difficult by pretending not to understand.

He remembers thinking it was unclear to his first resource-room teacher what she was supposed to do: He thought the teacher believed he was pretending not to see the difference between a "b" and a "d," or a "p" and a "q." When he and I spoke concerning this testimony two days ago, he told me that the resource room is often in an out-of-the-way, forgotten space in the school—much like the students who are placed there, who have often already been given up on, he said.

We cannot afford to continue to give up on these students. We need their talents as architects, as engineers, as doctors, as scientists. We must test children for dyslexia, and provide teachers with the comprehensive training to help all students learn to read, for the sake of these children, and for all of us.