

My name is Brenna Jaskiewicz, I reside in Oakdale, CT and am providing this testimony in support of Senate Bill No. 317, An Act Concerning Dyslexia, with amendments. This is my written testimony and I will not be testifying at the hearing.

This bill calls for "a Course" in Dyslexia.

I respectfully request you amend this bill to include:

- Comprehensive teacher preparation using evidence based curriculum and content (graduate level) regarding the literacy instruction for students with Dyslexia.
- Teacher preparation must align with evidence based standards that are proven to be effective.
- Candidates seeking a remedial reading endorsement must complete a graduate level program aligned with evidence-based practices and the International Dyslexia Association Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

STEPHANIE'S STORY

My 19 year old daughter, Stephanie, is dyslexic. My son, Christopher, age 15 is also dyslexic. I will focus on my experiences with Stephanie; as she was our first child with dyslexia and has suffered many hurtful setbacks because of the failure to be identified as dyslexic and not having received appropriate instruction.

As early as Kindergarten, my instincts told me that Stephanie was not learning to read as expected. It was obvious by her use of spoken vocabulary and her creative methods of problem solving that she was intelligent. Unfortunately, **Stephanie's teachers had not been taught to recognize the signs of dyslexia, nor how to teach students with dyslexia.** I expressed my concerns regarding Stephanie's inability to read and spell even the smallest of words, but the teachers, administrators, and school psychologist **told me she just needed to try harder and practice more; that she would eventually 'catch on'.** I insisted the school try something, and although she hadn't been flagged by any of their reading assessments as needing help, the school indulged me and included Stephanie in a reading intervention program aimed at improving her oral reading rate (measured in words per minute). Stephanie's tutor in this program was kind and helped Stephanie feel a bit more confident in her being, but it did not increase her reading fluency or spelling ability. I continued to tell Stephanie's teachers that there was a problem but they assured me that her performance was adequate as measured by their K-3 assessments.

During the time between Kindergarten to third grade, **Stephanie often cried and said she was stupid. She was visibly shaken when she was asked to read a sentence aloud, or write sentences for her spelling words.** She could copy the spelling words, however, when she tried to put them into sentences the other words in the sentence were often misspelled. The teachers would correct her papers and **told her to be more careful and take her time...**as if her mistakes were due to her rushing and being careless. If they only knew how often **it took Stephanie 2 hours to complete a homework assignment that took her third grade peers less than 25 minutes to complete.** The required 20 minutes of daily reading resulted in tantrums, crying spells, and Stephanie yelling, **"I can't do it, I'm stupid and I hate reading!"**

The summer between 3rd and 4th grade was heartbreaking. Stephanie tried to participate in the 'Governor's Summer Reading Program'. She could not read ANY of the books on the 2nd or 3rd grade reading lists. Stephanie's self-esteem and her loathing for reading kept getting worse.

In the beginning of fourth grade, Stephanie's teacher called me stating that she was concerned about Stephanie's yearly reading assessment scores. I was surprised since at the end of third grade her teacher was adamant that Stephanie's scores were fine. The 4th grade teacher went on to explain that the assessment they use in 4th & 5th grade is different from the K-3 assessments. According to this new assessment **Stephanie was more than a full year behind in her reading** performance. This is something I had been saying all along, and although I was glad to see some recognition on the school's part, I was concerned about the discrepancies between the assessments. At this point I requested that Stephanie be given a much more comprehensive assessment.

A battery of **tests were administered by the district school psychologist and revealed an above average IQ and a solid level of comprehension.** Stephanie scored extremely well in abstract reasoning, and very well in any test that was not restricted by time. Her processing speed was dramatically lower than all of her other scores.

After this testing, the school said that although Stephanie seemed to have unexpected difficulty with reading, **she did not qualify as learning disabled. The School Psychologist explained Stephanie's very low processing score by saying that Stephanie seemed "overly cautious", and was probably taking her time so as to not get an answer wrong.** Stephanie's reading difficulties continued and Stephanie became depressed and said she felt stupid due to the **effects of the dyslexia on her reading fluency, spelling, her inability to rhyme and difficulty with rote memorization of multiplication facts.**

Stephanie attended **weekly counseling sessions** with the School Based Health clinic counselor to work on her self-esteem. These weekly sessions, coupled with daily reading, spelling and self-esteem sessions with me (her mom) helped keep Stephanie from failing in school and helped to keep her self-worth somewhat intact. **Helping Stephanie had become my full-time job**, on top of the part-time job I had outside the home and in addition to taking care of our other two children.

The summer **between 4th and fifth grade offered a slight bright spot; Stephanie FINALLY read her first book on her own. "Sparky and Eddie-The First Day of School", a 2nd grade book** will forever be Stephanie's FAVORITE story; because SHE READ IT!

In **5th grade Stephanie was still having difficulty in reading and spelling**, and she was placed in **ANOTHER reading intervention program.** This program did help Stephanie track her words per minute and any progress she made. Her rate improved very slightly and Stephanie liked the program. At the end of 5th grade, the students were given a summer reading list. Since Stephanie was not able to read any of the suggested books for her grade level, I asked the school if I could borrow the reading intervention program she had been using during the school year. We used this over the summer to keep Stephanie reading, hoping she would not lose any more ground. Stephanie was (and is) very conscientious and did the reading as I assigned it to her throughout the summer. **However, by 6th grade Stephanie was still not reading at an appropriate level as evidenced by her Connecticut Mastery**

Scores. She was put in **another reading intervention class which was aimed at improving comprehension. Stephanie hated it, she cried and kept saying, “This isn’t helping me, Mom! I understand everything I read; it just takes me forever to read it!”** I explained to Stephanie that she needed to participate in any remediation the school offered, so that she wouldn’t be seen as refusing help. (Even though that ‘help’ was not helpful or appropriate for a student with dyslexia. I told her that the school needed to see her try, and try we did. **We tried every option the school had to offer, and then some. We even drove to Cranston, Rhode Island to attend tutoring by the Scottish Rite, but the drive created a hardship for us.**

At the beginning of **Stephanie’s 7th grade year I knew in my heart that Stephanie was dyslexic.** I researched on my own and **I read Dr. Sally Shawitz’ book “Overcoming Dyslexia”.** For the first time I knew we were not alone. I read about **other very bright children like Stephanie who had severe difficulty with reading.** I insisted that the district administer another round of testing which included different tests that were not covered in the typical tests she had already taken. Again, timed tests were her weakest area, **her comprehension was high when a story was read aloud to her,** but very low if she read the story herself. Still, **the school said she wasn’t learning disabled and since she was passing all of her classes, they didn’t see a problem.**

I had always refused to let Stephanie fail just to prove that traditional approaches don't work for her. (Letting her fail was halfheartedly suggested to me after a PPT meeting if ‘I really wanted her to be identified as learning disabled and qualify for services’; but failing was not an option for us!)

I would no longer wait while the school tried inappropriate (perhaps well-intended) remedies, so **after nine years** of advocating, trial and error intervention programs, several rounds of testing, and endlessly reassuring Stephanie that she was not stupid, I attended a 2 day conference in Maine geared for parents of students with special needs. The conference facilitators suggested I get comprehensive Neuropsychological testing done on Stephanie.

Early in **9th grade I hired a private neuropsychologist who discovered & diagnosed Stephanie's dyslexia and gave specific recommendations for reasonable accommodations** in school. These accommodations **did not teach her how to read more efficiently, she was merely given more time to do the reading.** The school system did not recognize the dyslexia diagnosis as a specific learning disability but allowed for a few accommodations in a 504 plan based on the fact that she also had been diagnosed with mild ADHD. By this point Stephanie and I had discovered ways to accommodate her learning style and needs at home, so as long as she received extra time on tests including standardized tests I did not fight further for her to have an IEP and be recognized as having a learning disability.

If teacher’s had been taught early identification and the use of evidence-based interventions, Stephanie could have received an appropriate education based on her needs. It may have prevented the numerous crying spells and endless hours of unhelpful remediation. I do not want other parents and children to go through the years of strife that Stephanie and I did. It was a constant struggle to not let Stephanie become too depressed and insecure as many dyslexic children do when not identified early and given appropriate instruction and accommodations.

Through persistent efforts on both Stephanie's and my parts, and my own research and advocacy on her behalf, Stephanie has done very well in school. Her studies at UCONN take a great deal out of her; she needs to take double the time to read and study as her peers.

The years Stephanie spent undiagnosed and inappropriately instructed left their mark; **she still struggles with anxiety and depression and still does not consider herself 'as smart as her classmates'.**

Fortunately, **the facts say differently; she has completed 2 years as a Chemistry/pre-med courses at UCONN in Storrs with a 3.0 GPA.**

The journey for students with unexpected reading difficulties does not have to be so hurtful and exhausting. Thank God I had the time, patience, intelligence and resources to help Stephanie. I can only imagine the tragic results that other families endure who may not.

Thank you for your time and for your dedication to Connecticut's students.

Brenna Jaskiewicz

11 Michigan Circle

Oakdale, CT 06370

860-908-1023