

My name is Erin Holden and I am a pre-service elementary teacher from Durham, CT. I graduated last May with a Bachelor's in Elementary Education as a part of UConn's I/BM program and am now finishing up my final semester of my Master's year. I am providing written testimony regarding Senate Bill No. 317, An Act Concerning Dyslexia. While I strongly support this bill, I respectfully request you amend S.B. 317 to include that candidates seeking a remedial reading endorsement complete a graduate level program aligned with evidence-based practices and IDA Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

On February 18, 2016, President Obama signed the Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia (READ) Act into law. This act requires the National Science Foundation to fund research into the early identification of dyslexia, the professional development for teachers and administrators, and curricula, tools and models of intervention. While this is a great first step towards helping students with dyslexia achieve in our current school systems, now we need to turn our attention to another critical topic. We have to focus on the next hurdle, which if not addressed, will continue to negatively affect the educational experiences of students with dyslexia – teacher preparation.

As evident by the countless stories of families of students with dyslexia as well as recent Connecticut reading scores, teacher preparation programs are not adequately preparing educators to teach reading to students with dyslexia. Being a pre-service teacher, I am in the unique position of seeing these teacher preparation programs as a student myself, while simultaneously observing in-service teachers reflect on their own training and preparation programs out in the field. I have seen firsthand the limited amount of exposure that pre-service teachers receive about dyslexia. In the fall of my Junior year, the 2016 cohort was enrolled in a course entitled "Exceptionality," which should be noted is the only special education course I am required to take in a total of three years in the I/BM program. The purpose of this course was to provide a brief introduction to students with disabilities. We spent two weeks on learning disabilities. Dyslexia was mentioned once.

In our Master's year, we have the option of taking 15 credits worth of electives. Elementary and secondary pre-service teachers are not required to take any sort of literacy or special education course. We are being sent out into the world of teaching with almost nonexistent experience, advice or knowledge of how to teach students with language/learning disabilities. This hurts all students, especially those with dyslexia. Special education pre-service teachers on the other hand, are required to enroll in a literacy course. The courses have broad titles such as, "Literacy Supports for Adolescent Learners" or "Writing Supports for Students with Learning Difficulties." As with most classes, the content of the course is decided upon by each individual professor, meaning dyslexia is often not the focus, and in many cases as explained by my colleagues, dyslexia is not even mentioned.

The UConn Neag School of Education is the #1 public graduate school of education in the Northeast and the #21 public graduate school of education in the nation with the special education program ranking #14 nationally. How is it possible that such a highly regarded education program infrequently teaches its pre-service teachers about a language-based learning disability which can affect upwards of twenty percent of the student population? Neag is just

one of the many schools of education across the nation on a list of higher institutions which turn out educators who do not know how to work with, and best support, students with dyslexia.

In-service teachers also routinely reflect on their lack of training, even if they graduated from their teacher preparation programs years ago. I have heard numerous teachers from districts across the state comment on the fact they received no training in their teacher preparation programs concerning learning disabilities, specifically referencing a lack of awareness and understanding of dyslexia. Even when teachers do pursue a sixth year/additional endorsement in Remedial Reading, often those programs do not give enough time to focus on dyslexia. Often, the track for Remedial Reading might include a course or two in reading difficulties, again leaving it up to the professor whether he or she will focus on evidence-based practices for working with students with dyslexia, or dyslexia at all. Some districts have attempted to close this gap by providing a few sporadic professional developments on learning disabilities, but this is not enough.

This solution is like sticking Band-Aids on a leaky pipe. While it may help in the short term, some teachers are picking up fragments of evidenced-based practices to support students with dyslexia, eventually the pipes will burst. And who is hurt in the process? The students.

If these failures of teacher preparation programs are not addressed, there are only a handful of outcomes that can happen. The first is obvious. Students with dyslexia do not receive the proper support they need and therefore, their reading and overall education suffers. We then continue to churn out hundreds of students who cannot read, or struggle greatly to do so. Another option is districts shoulder the burden and costs. They either spend time and valuable resources educating their teachers or bear the cost of outplacements of students. In both scenarios, families also take the financial hit to compensate this lack of teacher knowledge when it comes to paying for special tutors, testing and outplacements.

Therefore, the only viable and realistic solution is to target the root of these problems – the teacher preparation programs.

S.B. 317 calls for the addition of a course to teacher preparation programs in “the diagnosis and remediation of reading and language arts” for students with dyslexia. While this is more than what is currently in place, it only covers the tip of the iceberg. All teachers need to be trained to meet the literacy needs of every student, including students with dyslexia. This education and knowledge therefore, cannot be gained from a once a week class. Instead, we must structure teacher preparation programs to be rich in evidence-based curriculum and content and align them with the IDA Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading. All other facets of teacher preparation programs are based on research based content. Why should remedial reading be the only exception? This course of action is the only way we will be able to ensure that teachers have the foundations and skills to successfully teach students with dyslexia.

Thank you,

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