

My name is Jennifer Farrell and I live in Essex, CT. As a Connecticut educator and parent of two dyslexic children, I support HB7254. My daughters' stories illustrate why this bill is so badly needed. As a certified reading and language arts consultant, I was confident in my ability to navigate the system, work with our school team, and get my daughters effective reading instruction. Sadly, instead, it has been a very humbling and frustrating experience.

Special educators are on the front lines reading instruction for dyslexic students. In many Connecticut districts that use the Response to Intervention approach, including ours, once a student is identified as being dyslexic she no longer receives specialized instruction or interventions through general education teachers or reading specialists. Instead, she is usually formally identified as a special education student and receives services, including reading instruction, from a special educator. Considering that one- in- five Connecticut students is dyslexic, it makes sense to require structured literacy training for those pursuing a special education certification in our state. When considering HB7254, I also ask that you consider the recent data that suggests that eighty percent of special education students identified as having Specific Learning Disorder, or SLD, have some form of dyslexia. The great majority of these students receive literacy instruction, from a special educator as part of their Individualized Education Plans.

Once my daughters were identified as having dyslexia, I was surprised to learn how little dyslexia training our special educators had. For my older daughter, it has been particularly difficult. It took many years, and much prompting from me, before her special education teachers were willing to consider that she might have dyslexia. There was no malice here. They simply had no training in identifying and remediating dyslexia. In fact, once identified at the end of grade eight, there was no one in our district who could provide structured literacy instruction to my daughter at her high school. The district resorted to having my daughter use Skype to receive instruction from a highly-trained instructor in Mississippi. Although she made great progress with her tutor, I believe she would have been much better served with in -person instruction from a special educator at her own school. For my daughter, the lack of special educators trained in dyslexia has had a profoundly negative effect on her educational experience. And more importantly to me, it has crushed her self-esteem. To the best of my knowledge, none of my daughter's special educator teachers has had more than a superficial understanding dyslexia. Not one. Although she is now a high-achieving tenth-grader, the struggle to get effective instruction and bring dyslexia awareness has taken its toll.

For my younger child, the road has been somewhat easier. But, only because I am "one of those" parents. I knew to ask how much training her special educator had in structured literacy, and, when the answer was "minimal," I knew to ask that outside consultants from Learning House and Shoreline Reading be brought in to provide training and oversee my daughter's program. I also knew to ask that the district get formal training for her special educator. This training has proven to be invaluable. My daughter has been able to stay in district instead of being placed at a school which specializes in language learning difficulties. Her now trained special education teacher has been instrumental in my daughter's success at school.

The importance of dyslexia training for special educators cannot be overstated. Dyslexia is a neurological disorder which interferes with the acquisition and processing of language. This disability affects students in all subject areas, not just in reading. Often, the special educator works as a liaison between the student and regular education teachers. Providing meaningful training in dyslexia for special ed teachers will allow them to ensure that appropriate accommodations and modifications are made by every teacher a dyslexic student interacts with each day. After all, reading and language processing occurs across all subject areas.

As certified Reading Consultant, I am truly dismayed at the lack of awareness about dyslexia in Connecticut schools. Although there is an abundance of research indicating that structured literacy interventions are most effective for dyslexic students, many districts have few special educators with any training in effectively identifying, remediating and accommodating these students. Requiring dyslexia training for all teachers will help our schools to provide needed services more effectively.

I respectfully request that you support HB7254, and keep Connecticut moving forward for our dyslexic students.

Thank you,

Jennifer Farrell