

March 12, 2017

Our name is Mike and Kris Ferris, we live in Wethersfield, Connecticut. We fully support HB 7254, An Act Requiring Special Education Teachers to Complete a Program of Study in Evidence-Based Structured Literacy Interventions for Students with Dyslexia.

This is our written testimony and we will not be testifying at the hearing. We have lived in Wethersfield, CT for the past 23 years with our three children, who are now 24yrs, 20yrs and 13yrs old, two of which are diagnosed with dyslexia.

Our oldest wasn't officially diagnosed with dyslexia until he was out of high school and almost out of college. He has struggled with reading, spelling and math his entire life. When he was in second grade we realized he struggled with reading and we had to fight the public school system to get him into the reading program through 5th grade, where they said he could read within the accepted limits and took him out of the reading program. In 6th grade and beyond we knew he still struggled with reading, spelling and math because he always fell below the average on his CMT scores throughout his school years. He just was very quiet and never complained and always seemed to make good grades. We just figured he tested poorly.

Until recently we never really knew how badly the public school system failed our oldest son! As parents we were uneducated about dyslexia and the broad scope of the learning disability. We have since educated ourselves over the last three years with the diagnosis of dyslexia of our youngest son and over time have come to the realization that our oldest son was dyslexic too.

There were many signs that he was dyslexic through out his childhood, we were just unaware of the symptoms and characteristics. Such as; he was unable to pass the written test for his driver's license permit. He took it twice and failed each time. Looking back on it now, we can remember how nervous he was each time and how disappointed and ashamed he was in failing. We couldn't understand how a high honor student couldn't pass the test. It wasn't until he took the drivers education class where they taught all the information orally, he didn't have to read anything and he was able to absorb all the information he needed to pass his driver's license written test

on his first attempt. In high school he had several opportunities to take AP Classes, but only decided to take two rather than four and when we asked him why he just said it was going to be a lot of work for him. The two classes he did take in AP he got A's, but when he had the chance to take the tests in order to get the college credits he chose not to take them. We thought he was crazy for not taking the tests because he put so much effort into the classes and it was a shame that he wouldn't reap the benefits from taking them. Now we sit and realize after talking to him that he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to read through the questions and answer them correctly, we only wished he was able to convey this to us when he was younger or at the very least we wish we knew the signs. How hard it must have been for him living with the fear of written words. Reality hits home about two years ago when we decided to all go for a walk and look at the Halloween decorations in Old Wethersfield. We came upon one decoration that had a story to it. We asked my youngest son, who we knew was dyslexic, to read the first one out loud and he did, so then we asked my oldest son to read the next one out loud and he flat out refused. We were quite surprised, it was just us, no one else around and he was 22 years old at the time. The fear in his face we will never forget. The light bulb went on for us and we both realized our oldest son is dyslexic too and we never knew. How did we miss this? He was now in college and we were just learning the extent of his dyslexia. We started to ask him questions and that's when he admitted that he never read a book in middle school or high school. He explained that he would skim the back of the book or a chapter as needed, he also said he would ask other students about the book in the beginning of a class or watch a movie version of the book and would somehow be able to get an A or a B on every test. He could mask it and adapt and get by.

As with most dyslexics he has an above average IQ and is a talented, gifted artist and always has managed to get good grades throughout his academic life, making honors or high honors regardless of his learning disability. Which is why we believe he was passed through the school system without the proper diagnosis and support he needed and unfortunately still currently continues to struggle with reading today. He has now graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Graphic Designs and is working while going to school to receive his Masters Degree in Motion Media Design, he figured out a way.

Even though he is very smart he didn't do very well on his SATS, or on multiple choice or any test for that matter where he had to read a lot. He

was our 1st child and we were ignorant about L/D and dyslexia. We also put a lot of faith into the school system and educators and trusted their opinion. We were unaware of the lack of education that the special education teachers actually have regarding dyslexia. What we have since learned is that there are many accommodations that our son should have been provided, the most helpful would have been to have someone read him the questions out loud where he most likely would have done much better. His test results never really showed what he truly knew. Dyslexics who do not have the proper instruction get creative at figuring out ways to get through the system without really learning how to read.

- They observe - looking for clues in pictures or other kinds of illustrations.
- They guess – at words or replace a word with a similar word such as:
home for house.
- They listen - paying attention to what their teacher is saying or what other kids are reading out loud.
- They memorize - remembering what they hear as someone reads or talks to them.

The unfortunate part of this story is it doesn't have to be this way. There are known reading instruction to specifically teach dyslexics in a way that they learn. This type of instruction has been proven to work and is based upon a systematic and explicit understanding of language structure, including phonics. This reading instruction goes by many names, Structured Literacy, Orton-Gillingham, Simultaneous Multisensory, Explicit Phonics, Lindamood Bell and others.

In 2013 my youngest was 8 years old and in third grade and again we realized that he too was struggling to read and write but, this time it was a little different, more severe, everything took him so much longer to accomplish than my older two. For example; we tried to teach him to ride a bike at 5 years old like we did the other two, but it took him until he was 11 years old to get it. However, once he learns something it's learned for life and he is now great at riding a bike! It also took him longer to count, do his math facts, tie his shoes, throw and catch a baseball. He just needs more time for everything and he will get it. As third grade progressed besides struggling with reading and spelling simple sight words such as: does, those, being, two, blue, orange etc., we also noticed he would struggle with

reading the word problems in math, but would understand the concepts or processes. He also, struggled with writing (dysgraphia). Writing prompts would come home twice a week and they would take many tears and hours to complete. He had a great vocabulary, but just could not put his thoughts down on paper at all. He was only 8 years old at the time and we were afraid he was beginning to not like school. Which was a shame because the truth of the matter was he was quite inquisitive and was eager to learn. He would come home and would be able to tell us an entire book that was read to the class or repeat back a history lesson almost verbatim and just loved to absorb as much information that was orally taught to him as possible. During the year his teacher insisted he needed math help. We disagreed and said he needed reading and writing help. They ignored our request and put him in math help. Third grade was awful for our son. Homework was tearful and besides not getting the reading help he needed his teacher would embarrass my son and other kids in his class that struggled with the “normal” things his peers would be able to do. Her approach was to humiliate them to get them to do what they were “supposed to” do. When he struggled with tying his shoes his teacher would call him out and humiliate him in front of the class. He would come home and say, “Mrs. _____ made so and so cry today, and she tried to embarrass me, but I won’t give her the satisfaction, I won’t cry in front of her”. It was sad and what I would call teacher bullying, that the children who most needed support and understanding were treated as if they were stupid, lazy or obstinate. We told him not to let it bother him and lucky for us he had another gift which was thick skin, he never let it affect him.

Finally, towards the end of our son’s third grade year during the spring we decided to go for outside help and testing. We had him tested in April 2013 by a clinical psychologist where they diagnosed him with moderate to severe dyslexia and ADHD. After the diagnosis we met with the teachers at a PPT where they continued to disagree with us. They insisted that he needed math support and we insisted that he needed help with reading and writing. Despite our efforts in trying to convince them they were not going to give him the reading support that we requested and that he needed. Again we found ourselves fighting the public school system and losing.

So, we decided to pull him out of the public school system and home schooled him from 4th through 6th grade, where he had one on one instruction. June of 2016, we decided to have him tested by a certified fellow Orton-Gillingham specialist to see if she thought he could handle going back into the public school system for 7th grade. She said her test

results showed he was reading and writing at a third grade level and concurred with the clinical psychologist that previously diagnosed him with severe dyslexia and in order for him to thrive in school he would need a multisensory one-on-one curriculum 4 to 5 times a week for 90 minutes a day to support his learning disability, but said his test results showed that he had an above average IQ and thought he could handle the knowledge of seventh grade without a problem.

So against our better judgment we put him into the 7th grade middle school in August. We met with the principal and assistant to the special education department before school started. We gave them all of our testing and our son's diagnosis, from 2013 and 2016. They were aware of the people that had tested our son because the Wethersfield school system had used both of the dyslexic consultants that tested our son and was currently using one of them in the 2016-2017 school year. So, we went into the school system again naïve because we thought we had our tests/diagnosis, they new of these people, we explained all of his symptoms, we explained the previous bullying both of our children had experienced and we explained that we were apprehensive about putting him back into another teacher bullying situation. They said they understood and told us not to worry they would not do this. We gave them permission to test him and their diagnosis came back as ADHD/OHI and refused the dyslexic diagnosis. We were shocked to say the least! They accepted the ADHD portion of our testing, but refused the dyslexic portion of our testing saying that their tests did not show that he was in fact dyslexic. At our 2nd PPT to review the schools test results we brought the dyslexic consultant that the school system is currently using to provide Orton-Gillingham to another student to our PPT to review the schools own testing, where she explained to them that they were reading their own test results wrong and that their test results clearly showed that our son was dyslexic and explained to them why and what he would need. They still refused her expertise in this matter and refused our son the Orton-Gillingham tutor 4 to 5 times a week as she advised. They did however, agree to special education services. The special education services does not address his dyslexia in anyway as they still labeled him as ADHD/OHI. He does homework three times a week in resource class.

Even with homework help, he still needs help at home and some days can take three to four hours to complete. Since their own testing shows him reading at 4th to 5th grade level, in order to get him through his homework in a reasonable amount of time we do assist him with what he needs. We read to him out loud from his work books or worksheets, we have him

dictate to us what he wants to say and then we dictate it back to him to have him write it down. We have recently found some assistive technology on his iPad and iPhone that he finds useful. If there is going to be a test we make him flash cards and recently found an electronic flash cards App by Chegg that he can create himself through voice talk dictation. He struggles with copying and taking notes. So, we have been fighting the school since the beginning of the year to have them accommodate giving him class notes and making sure he has the correct homework written down. They claim he is being irresponsible for not being able to do this. To further complicate things our son has all A's and B's and has made honors in the 1st Trimester and will probably make it again in the 2nd Trimester. He works four times as hard as everyone else and does not have a lot of free time because of the amount of homework and effort he is putting in to get him these grades. Unfortunately, my son is still reading and writing at 4th grade level without help. If he could read and write he would probably be skipping a grade because we believe he is twice exceptional.

The public school system is again letting us down. They say things to him such as: "Your mother needs to cut the chain"., "If you don't write your homework in your agenda book you will get a lunch detention"., They pull him out for resource class three times a week and don't give him enough time to make up the missing class work and then blame him for being irresponsible. Again we find ourselves having our child being bullied for his learning disability. It is unacceptable and it needs to stop!

At our 3rd PPT we brought an advocate to see if we could get outside testing. The Wethersfield School system refused and said they would take us to due process, leaving us with not much of a choice. So we decided anyways to seek out our own outside testing yet again. This time by a doctor with a Ph. D at a Neuropsychological Service. We presented her with all of our previous testing from the clinical psychologist in 2013, the fellow Orton-Gillingham specialist testing from June 2016 and all of the Wethersfield School's testing from the fall of 2016 along with recent school work. The doctor said that our son was tested to death with over a 100 different kinds of tests and that he did not need anymore testing. More tests would not change the results, which is that our son has severe dyslexia and that at this time it would be cruel to do anymore testing on him as it could further affect him mentally in a negative manner, such as; in his self esteem or self worth. All of the tests including the Wethersfield School's tests

clearly showed that our son was dyslexic and should be classified as Specific Learning Disability – Dyslexia, as this is the most pervasive diagnosis for him within the educational setting. The doctor also provided us with recommendations which followed in the lines of all of the other professionals that had previously diagnosed our son.

The doctor's recommendations were as follows:

Our son was in need of educational placement and specialized instruction addressing phonological impairment. He requires phonemic awareness training. Phonemic awareness is a more basic process than traditional phonics training, which focuses on the correspondence between written letters and sounds and speech. He needs phonologically-based program, such as Wilson or Orton Gillingham. Provide this service for at least 45 minutes daily with a special education teacher certified in these programs.

- a. Practice oral reading skills, as it enhances fluency better than silent reading practice.
- b. Work on traditional phonics skills as well. The most effective phonological development components in reading research at this time involves systematic review of basic phonics elements, such as letter sounds when needed; practice in segmenting short words in print; blending methods, such as orally stretching out the sounds in words; contextual application of analytical phonics methods, such as word family; integration of reading and writing activities. Reading decoding work should focus on reading material that is at our son's instructional level for word recognition at any given time.
- c. Additional instruction in written language and expression is also needed, particularly spelling. Spelling words should be integrated with reading curriculum and/or words that are grouped together in phonologically related word families. The use of the word wall would be helpful for him. In classroom application, this consists of a list of words on the wall, according to their beginning letters alphabetically, to which he can refer when doing written work. He will be expected to spell correctly all words on the word wall in his written works, and words are gradually added as they are taught in the curriculum.

- d. Provide supportive math services, as performance fell below age and grade-level expectations.
- e. Consider utilizing Intervention Central website for worksheets to address sight-word reading, decoding, and other academic skills.
- f. He will benefit from a program assisting with writing organization when he reaches such level of writing achievement. Consider using 'Inspiration' to address these needs.
- g. Monitor progress closely in the areas of reading fluency, word decoding, sentence construction, paragraph structure, and organization of longer written products. Use monthly curriculum-based measurements to track progress.
- h. Speech-to-type software is needed for written assignments.

We have hired and advocate and now an attorney to fight for our child's right to have a free and an appropriate education that every child is entitled to. We find ourselves depleting our retirement fund to fight for something that everyone knows he has. He is dyslexic, it will never go away. He is smart, but needs more time and he is entitled to a free and appropriate education which at this time the Wethersfield School system is not able or willing to provide. Our son should not have to feel bad about being himself and have educators judge him on what he can put on paper because they are uneducated about what dyslexia truly is. Our hope is that by testifying today, it will help another child in the future to not have to be subjected to the ignorance of public school systems and special education teachers that are not being educated themselves on how to help dyslexic students.

We fully support HB 7254, An Act Requiring Special Education Teachers to Complete a Program of Study in Evidence-Based Structured Literacy Interventions for Students with Dyslexia.

Sincerely,
Mike and Kris Ferris