

March 10, 2015

Dear Chair Roblan and Education Committee Members,

Senate Bill 612 may be the most important measure to cross your desk this term. Dyslexia impacts every classroom across the state, and the quality of life of a huge proportion of our population. And yet most teachers seem to know almost nothing about it.

I began studying dyslexia in 1994, working as a contracted mental health counselor in N and NE Portland. While shadowing a student at John Ball Elementary, I asked his teachers how I might support his success. The response?

“Just teach him to read!”

This bright 4th grade student with a motivated, educated family was a non-reader. His teachers had tried everything they knew, and nothing had worked. For months, I tried everything I knew, and nothing worked.

That failure—not just mine, but systemic—to reach this single child, to teach him what he so dearly needed to know, led to a complete career overhaul. I have spent the last 20 years studying dyslexia, working directly with struggling students, their families and concerned professionals. I have learned several critical things:

- **Up to 25% of our population suffers from a degree of dyslexia;** for up to 10% the condition is severe. Research suggests that 65% of our students need specific, direct instructional techniques to learn to read. Only 35% are “natural readers.” These numbers have nothing to do with general intelligence. In fact, most dyslexics are of average intelligence or above.
- **Dyslexic individuals who do not receive skillful intervention can suffer lifelong consequences that affect society as a whole.** Many dyslexics describe school as a “nightmare” and suffer debilitating anxiety and self-esteem issues that plague their relationships, career choices, and all aspects of their lives into adulthood. In the 2010 book *Dyslexia and Mental Health*, Neil Alexander Passe cites a study of 29 dyslexic adults in which 22 had a depressive disorder at some point in their lives. From the stories I have heard from surviving family members of dyslexics who committed suicide, I have no trouble believing this figure. The same book connects decreasing self-esteem because of school failure with a growth in deviant behavior, and current numbers suggest that upwards of 50% of our prison population is dyslexic.
- **Teachers are not trained to address the needs of this population.** Successful programs abound. The effects of dyslexia can be largely mitigated

and overcome with appropriate educational strategies. These strategies are not difficult to learn. But teachers are not being taught.

- **Teacher training programs are not being held accountable.** Course content is systemically ignoring current, convergent research on literacy; teachers are sent out into the field woefully ill-prepared to teach a large portion of their student body. I received a MAT in 2000 from Lewis & Clark College, where the word dyslexia was never mentioned. Additional training at Portland State revealed a similar lack of information, and family members who obtained teaching degrees from around the state in recent years reported, again, that dyslexia was not part of their education. One said, “If dyslexia was mentioned at all, it was to present it as a myth.”
- **The lack of widespread, easily-available training on literacy acquisition is perpetuating the achievement gap.** Currently, most of the effective intervention for dyslexic students is provided by private tutors paid by families who can afford them. (As a side note, the student in my original story did receive effective tutoring, and his subsequent reading success led me to the training I received—I was not trained by an institution recognized in the State of Oregon, and yet it was the most important information I’ve ever gotten regarding education.) Specialists such as myself are largely independent contractors kept out of public schools. It is imperative that we bring the most effective literacy techniques to our teachers and the students they serve. Every student. Regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Our current situation borders on criminal. The solution is simple: train our teachers to recognize and treat dyslexia. I urge you, please, to support Senate Bill 612. I do not overstate it when I say our future is at stake.

Sincerely,

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