

March 16, 2015

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Moira Finnegan and I am a speech-language pathologist with Portland Public Schools.

I'd like to tell you a story about how I became passionate about addressing the needs of students with dyslexia. My first year on the job, I had a 5th grade student who transferred to my school from a special school for children with challenging behavior problems.

At my first meeting with him, this student said to me, "Can I tell you a secret?" It turns out his secret was, "I can't read."

He was a 5th grader, but he was reading and writing at the kindergarten level. He had behavior issues, which may well have developed as a way to divert attention from the fact that he couldn't read. But he had shown the courage to tell his secret, in the hopes that *someone* would finally teach him how to read. I was shocked and perplexed as to how this student had made it all the way from kindergarten to 5th grade, and no one had ever taught him how to read.

I said to this student, "This is your lucky year! I'm going to teach you how to read." But I quickly realized I was in way over my head. This student could read simple words such as "top", but when I added an "s" to create the word "stop," he was completely confused and could not read it.

When I worked with this student, my stomach would be in knots because I knew I didn't have the skills to help him. I could not understand why he seemed unable to learn how to read. But I had a suspicion that he may have dyslexia.

I sought out specialized training on dyslexia, and my suspicions were confirmed: this student was suffering from severe dyslexia that had remained unrecognized and untreated all these years. How was it possible that not a single educator among all those who had worked with this student over the years had missed the clear signs of dyslexia?

I came to realize there is a gaping hole in knowledge and services within our school system regarding dyslexia, and thousands of kids like this student are suffering because of it. This lack of knowledge is by no means unique to Portland Public Schools. Indeed, this gap in knowledge exists in school districts throughout Oregon, and across the country.

Educators need to know what works for students with dyslexia. Children with dyslexia respond best to sequenced, systematic and explicit reading instruction that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, and touch) at the same time. When given this type of instruction, students with dyslexia CAN learn to read. I only wish I had had the opportunity to use this teaching method with my student. Unfortunately, he moved to another state, so I never got the chance to see if I could teach him how to read.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children identified as reading disabled after second grade rarely catch up to their peers. We know that third grade students who are not reading at grade level are four times less likely to earn a high school diploma. For students living in poverty, reading below grade level in third grade makes them 12 times less likely to graduate from high school. So we have to reach these kids by first grade in order to give them the best chance of graduating from high school, which will in turn give them the best chances of succeeding in life.

I want to say in the strongest possible terms that dyslexia is an equity issue. Parents of the students I work with in North Portland will never be able to afford the private evaluations or tutoring that Jen and Lisa were able to provide for their children. Many families trust that the

public school system will do right by their children; that educators have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach all children how to read.

In reality, we educators are not given the tools we need in our teacher preparation programs to recognize and treat dyslexia in our students. The unfortunate result is thousands of students like my 5th grader who could not read, and perhaps never will.

I urge you to support SB 612. This measure requires university teacher training programs to offer at least one course on dyslexia. This is a modest first step toward ensuring that teachers all across Oregon will know the signs of dyslexia when they see them in their students, and will know how to teach students with dyslexia. It is a modest first step toward ensuring that all Oregon students will be given the opportunity to learn to read.

Sincerely,

Moira Finnegan
Speech-Language Pathologist
Portland Public Schools
Portland, OR