

Testimony for the Senate Committee on Education
In support of SB 612
March 17, 2015

Testimony by Desiree Wolcott-Cushman

Senate Bill 612 is important because it attempts to make reading accessible for ALL students in Oregon. In my experience, I have found it very difficult for most families who deal with dyslexia to find a free and appropriate education in our public schools.

As many as 1 in 5 students have some level of dyslexia. I have 4 sons, 3 of my sons have been identified as dyslexic. My husband and his father are also dyslexic. Dyslexia is an inherited disability. After connecting with other families who were struggling with the same issues, I know that this is a widespread issue and not something isolated to my family.

My oldest son, Bryan, started showing early signs of struggling with reading and writing in Kindergarten. It was extremely difficult to get the school to evaluate for the cause of his reading disability. I was judged by well meaning teachers. I was told to limit our TV viewing and screen time; we didn't own a TV. I was told to "lap read" with my child. I work in libraries, I was "lap reading" with our children more than 4 hours a day. I was told that my son, who wasn't reading in 2nd grade, yet, had a college level speaking vocabulary, was reaching his "full potential" as a learner. The school refused to test further. Child Find failed us, our family lived below the poverty line and we couldn't afford a private evaluation. My son started feeling like he was "othered" and the well intentioned teachers left me feeling lacking and helpless.

We moved from Lane County to the Portland Public school district, when Bryan was in 2nd grade. In 4th grade Bryan was finally tested, and found to have a Specific Learning Disability in reading and writing. We were finally able to get an IEP with accommodations. However, the reading strategies were ineffective and the interventions came too late. The school district didn't allow the educators to talk about dyslexia and no one seemed to know how to deal with it. Bryan continued to struggle. We were able to get a scholarship for Bryan to be tested for Dyslexia when he reached High School. Of course when the tests came back it showed that Bryan is dyslexic. Much valuable time had been lost at that point. The Blosser Center assigned one of their practicum students to tutor Bryan after school for free.

It was easier to spot with Keelin, my third child. He started 1st grade at the same time Bryan was starting High School. His teachers knew right away that there were reading struggles and wasted no time to start testing. Once the results came in they knew exactly what we were looking at, Dyslexia. What was different? the Special Education Coordinator at our school was familiar with Dyslexia and knew about multi-sensory approaches to teaching reading. My son started receiving appropriate interventions immediately. However, each grade change presented a new teacher that was unfamiliar with Dyslexia and was unprepared to assist my child on his path to reading.

I have learned a lot about Dyslexia over the past years. I have even trained as an Orton-Gillingham tutor. I have learned how to navigate the IEP meeting. I have learned how to stand my ground with accommodations. I have learned how to be kind and understanding with well-meaning teachers. I have learned how to educate teachers about dyslexia and what the best course of action is. Yet, it's still a struggle to get the IEP followed. I still get resistance from educators and support staff. Its frustrating for everyone when the schools and teachers are unprepared to help.

It is time for Teachers to have the skills needed to teach ALL students to read. Educators need to know about dyslexia, the most common of all learning disabilities. Parents should not have to fight with district officials to get proper testing or accommodations. Parents should not have to pay for outside resources to help their children learn how to read, which is something that the schools and teachers should be doing.

Thank you for your service. Please take my story to heart and investigate what schools are doing with students with dyslexia. I ask you to support Senate Bill 612.

The goals of this bill are to:

Ensure current teachers know the warning signs of dyslexia

Ensure University teacher preparation programs offer coursework on dyslexia

Ensure school districts screen for the risk factors of dyslexia in the earliest grades

Ensure ODE has a dyslexia specialist on staff to support school districts to help students with dyslexia succeed

Thank you,

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