

HB 612

Kathy Helgeson

School Improvement Specialist

Priority and Focus Schools

I am here today to make a difference in the world for so many children that have been born with amazing, dyslexic brains who will never realize their potential, because they won't go to school in a place that builds on their strengths and accommodates their weaknesses. Instead they will spend endless hours in remediation, while others stride ahead because they happen to be good at decoding text, forming letters on paper, and rote math.

My granddaughter is here with me today because we have fought for six years to get her the help and assistive technology she needs in her classroom. As of last Friday, we still have not accomplished that goal. But I'm not here to talk about my granddaughter, because she is one of the lucky ones. No matter what happens at school, she has a family that will provide whatever she needs to be confident and successful. Right now, that means educating her at home, away from her peers and the social life she enjoys. I am here to talk about the boy who sits beside her. He has the same problem, but he is not a "lucky one." His parents don't know how to navigate the school system and get him what he needs to experience success and enjoy learning. I'm here to talk about the little girl in a foster home who has no one to advocate for her. And for the 3-4 other students who, for whatever reason, are not recognized as dyslexic, and do not get accommodations or assistive technology to become confident learners.

You may find this unbelievable, but schools will tell you that dyslexia is a medical problem and schools don't deal with it. Many don't even believe it exists, or think it means seeing some letters backward. They suggest a child get "treatment," as if there is a cure for the way a dyslexic mind experiences the world. In reality, there is no cure because it is not a disease. It could be a gift, but it is not in our world, because a gift would not leave you struggling, failing, and full of shame. A dyslexic child in school often feels shame that he or she is not kind of kid they should be. It is not guilt, because guilt is a bad feeling about something you have done. They feel shame, because that is about who you are – something you cannot change – and shouldn't be made to feel they should. In my view, those who should be shamed are those who fail to see and believe the brain science that has revealed the truth about dyslexic children, and educational best practices that are truly the "cure" for massive, sustained failure of thousands of students. Of the 570,000 students in Oregon schools, somewhere between 1 in 10 and 1 in 5 are dyslexic. That means 50,000-100,000 students are affected by this bill. 15 to 30 thousand are sitting in K-3 classes right today, waiting for your help.

Every year over 15,000 Oregon students decide that school is not a place where they will ever be successful and drop out of our high schools - one in every 4 students. On average 4-6 dyslexic students are sitting in every Oregon elementary classroom right now, as we speak – and if they are receiving any supports, it is most likely in the form of "partner reading," taking it home and having their parents help, or some form of dependence on others; because the tools they need to be independent learners are not allowed or embraced by their teachers. For many, their fates are being sealed by ongoing failure. By 5th grade they will drop out, but they will continue to show up – by 10th grade they will disappear, and likely show up on public services, the criminal system, and continue the cycle of poverty.

Aside from the moral and ethical obligation to serve the students who come to our public schools, what is the cost of this bill? Not nearly as high as you may think. Nearly everything we need is common place in today's classrooms. The few additional programs may cost around \$100 per students, far less than the additional funds already provided for students with disabilities.

Audio Books - Bookshare is free, and Learning Ally is inexpensive, especially when purchased for multiple students. These allow students access to their grade level curriculum, not only in reading instruction, but throughout the day.

Electronic Version of Textbooks - readily available for all computer based documents, or can be scanned, and already required to be on the state adoption list.

Computers - Nearly all classrooms have classroom computers and access to one or more computer labs - already a necessity for Smarter Balanced assessments. Many students have a computer in their backpack in the form of a smart phone, ipad or laptop - but most schools won't allow students to use them.

DropBox - a free, easily accessed system allows the teacher to put the electronic worksheet into a folder that the student can access, and allows the student to turn in work by saving it to the turn in folder.

Teacher training - It is already required that teachers receive training in assistive technology.

More importantly, what is the cost of NOT passing this bill?

High drop out rates - 1 of 4 on average, much worse in some places

Dependency on public services for basic needs - food, shelter, health care

Unacceptably high prison populations - The School to Prison pipeline is firmly in place, and the lack of success turns the key that locks that door

When you ask someone about his or her school experience, it is usually pretty clear in their mind, particularly if it was a negative experience. School is where you first learned your place in the world; where you learned with whom you belong. When we don't address dyslexia, we fail many, many intelligent students and leave them thinking they are failures, and school is not the place where they "belong." If you have ever tried to learn something that you just seemed to have no talent for, you don't persevere forever. When are not successful, you eventually give up. We ask student to fail, but continue to try for 13 years. That is no likely to be a successful plan. Dropping out of school is a well document link to the likelihood of public assistance, teen pregnancy, and continued the cycle of poverty. The potential lost is a travesty.

In my view, a huge unintended consequence of this bill, is that it will force the issue of integrated technology in classroom instruction. This has been an initiative - *an expectation* - for as long as I have taught. Still it is not embraced by most. The teacher uses a computer, but the students may touch a computer once or twice a week. That is not preparing our students for their future. It is widening the gap for economically disadvantaged students, because their peers are growing up in an electronic world. Embracing the technology that will even the playing ground for dyslexic students will also push the envelope and begin to level the playing ground for children from poverty as well.

Dyslexia runs in families. My brother was very dyslexic. He was a 3th grader in 1959. I keep his report card on my desk to ground me in my mission. It is a solid block of Ds. A "D" in every subject, every quarter, except PE. The only comment the teacher had written for entire year was, "If David wants to learn to read, he just going to have to try a whole lot harder." His elementary school experience stuck with him his entire life. Just weeks before he was killed in an accident, at 36 years old, he told me about his 3rd grade teacher and how she had sat him in the back of the class and called it "special reading." His

self-worth and confidence eroded yearly, and he never knew the gifts he had for visualizing, creating, and problem solving until long after he left school. The only excuse for this kind of *malpractice* is that educators didn't know better. The most disturbing part about this bill, is that a bill is necessary to get educators to do the right thing. There is much talk about the "Knowing-Doing" gap. When we know better, we should do better. One of the best moves you could make toward closing the achievement gap is to pass this bill, post-haste. It will be a huge step forward for children with dyslexia, and it will also push open the door to assistive technology in ways that can help many more kids feel successful in school everyday, and continue to move forward to reach their true potential, and give back to the world in ways we cannot presently foresee.

As a teacher, the way in which I allow students to demonstrate their leaning has a huge bearing on their ability to do so. There is no downside to this bill. It is what we actually say we are already doing. It is not one more thing on the plate. It is not about being a teacher of the future. It is about being a modern teacher in 2015. We are already fifteen years into the 21st century. It is simply best practice for everyone. It levels the playing field and allows students to learn and show their knowledge in a way that plays to their strengths. That must be in place for ALL students if we are ever going to close the achievement gap. I urge you move forward, ASAP! The students are waiting.

Kathy Helgeson
Rogue Educational Consulting
PO Box 309
Gold Hill, OR 97525
541-601-2453