

**Testimony to the Oregon Senate Committee on Education
SB 221
March 30, 2017**

I am the very frustrated parent of an 8-year-old son who was recently diagnosed with dyslexia. I am writing to express my strong opposition to SB 221.

From where I sit, this bill is all about time, money, and control. The teaching universities don't want to spend the money to implement these standards at all. But that's what the law currently requires, so they are framing the argument in the form of a protest at the idea of adopting someone else's standards. They want to be able to control their own destinies, and they want three more years to do so. This is nothing more than a giant delaying tactic, and it is infuriating. I'll repeat: time, money, and control.

Time: For Oregon families who are raising dyslexic children, SB 221 is definitely about the concept of time and how quickly it flies by when a young brain is developing. All of the research shows that the earlier a dyslexic child begins evidence-based instruction, the better their chances are of succeeding in school. With every year that our kids' teachers don't get proper training, our kids will fall farther behind. Which leads to ...

Money: Research also shows that a child's chance of having dyslexia is unrelated to his or her socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, as things stand now in Oregon, kids with dyslexia will succeed in school only if their parents can afford years and years of private tutoring and, for many, home schooling or private schools.

Control: Our teachers want to teach our children, but they don't know how. My son's public school is a "good school" with high test scores. We considered ourselves lucky to be able to buy a house in that district. Yet the school staff gave us blank stares when we told them that our child had dyslexia. Dyslexia affects up to 20% of the population -- one in 5 people -- and it is not a newly discovered disability. It is statistically impossible that this school has never had a dyslexic student. Nevertheless, this "good school" doesn't know how to teach our son. Guess what? Neither did I until a year ago when my child was failing first grade.

A Drop in the Bucket Is Not Enough for Our Children

As of January 1, 2018, Oregon school districts will need to ensure that at least one K-5 grade teacher in each K-5 and K-8 school has received dyslexia-related training. At our son's "good school," the principal has told me that, for budget reasons, the special education teacher is going to have to become their dyslexia expert, on top of her current heavy load. I don't know how she is supposed to take those extra courses while maintaining her current workload, but simply having her in place will put the school in compliance with the law -- while providing only a drop in the bucket of the help my son and the school's other dyslexic students so desperately need.

What Oregon needs is a pipeline. We need for our teaching universities to be graduating new teachers who understand these teaching methods and are ready on day one to put them to use.

Teaching children to read when they have dyslexia is not rocket science, but it also doesn't look like traditional reading instruction. After our son was identified as having reading difficulties, he was placed into a remedial reading program, where he became incredibly frustrated because the program basically treated him like he was stupid. But he is not stupid. He is talented and artistic, with an enormous vocabulary and the memory of an elephant. He loves listening to Harry Potter books, and holds every detail of the complex storylines in his head. He loves science and he loves learning. He has a strong sense of justice and argues like a lawyer. He doesn't want to sit in a classroom and read preschool-level books over and over again, and that kind of traditional teaching method is not going to help him learn.

Because my husband and I both have good-paying jobs, we were able to begin sending our son to an excellent private reading tutor who uses multi-sensory instruction methods that are aligned with internationally recognized, evidence-based standards -- exactly the kind of standards our teaching universities don't want to adopt. When our son finally started making progress with his tutor, he was thrilled because she knows how to teach him in a way his brain can process. He feels like he is finally learning to read, and he now knows that he is not stupid. But it's only because someone knows how to teach him.

Our tutor has used these same methods to help many other children we know who do not have dyslexia, but who are struggling readers. Giving teachers proven tools and approaches to teach dyslexic children provides benefit far beyond the population of kids who have dyslexia, helping them address a range of reading problems and delays they'll encounter daily in the regular classroom setting.

These methods work, but if the teachers don't have access to them, they can't help our children -- and our kids don't have time to wait around while teaching universities drag their feet about developing their own standards and slowly disseminating this knowledge throughout our school districts. My son's teacher's husband and son both have dyslexia, and she told me that she had never really understood their struggles until she started teaching my son. She is a good teacher, and she's doing her best to learn how to help him, but she has 26 other kids to teach, several of whom have behavior problems and their own IEPs. She does not have a lot of extra bandwidth.

Our family is lucky that the special education reading curriculum at my son's school happens to be evidence-based; otherwise, I would be fighting yet another battle to get the school to use a curriculum that my son could actually learn from. But even with this, it's not enough. Our school has one special education teacher, who is struggling to address the needs of the school's dyslexic children in addition to children with other learning issues. *One teacher*, for a student population of almost 900. If Oregon wants to be serious about teaching all our children and preparing them to be productive citizens who can help move our state into the future, we need a pipeline of trained teachers who will eventually filter out to every classroom in every school, giving our kids what they need, where they need it, at every grade level throughout their school careers.

Words of Wisdom from My Son

We talk about dyslexia a lot with our son. He is twice-exceptional, which means that he is intellectually gifted and also has a learning disability. His gifts mask his disability and his disability masks his gifts.

Earlier this week, I told my son about SB 221. He was horrified and told me this -- and remember, this is

coming from an 8-year-old kid.

He said: **“If the teachers don’t know how to teach dyslexic kids, then I’m not going to be able to read. And if I can’t read, I can’t learn. And if I can’t learn, I can’t go to college. And if I can’t go to college, I can’t get a job. And if I can’t get a job then I’ll be homeless, and I don’t want to be homeless. Why don’t they want to teach the teachers how to teach me?”**

It’s a great question. I hope that you will consider it carefully.

Respectfully,

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