

February 5, 2018

9830 Briar Drive  
Overland Park, KS 66207

Dear members of the Education Committee:

I feel fortunate to have this opportunity to make a contribution in support of Dyslexia legislation for the State of Kansas. My statement is long, but my daughter spent 12 years in public education before she was diagnosed with dyslexia and I hope to show you how there could have been so many opportunities for professionals to identify her as a student needing dyslexia testing throughout her childhood. The delayed diagnosis negatively impacted her and our family emotionally, socially, educationally and financially. Having a clear diagnosis and educational plan would have also saved her teachers valuable time as well.

I wish this legislation had been passed years ago so that my daughter could have benefited from the services that may soon be offered to dyslexic students in Kansas's schools. My daughter is in 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the Shawnee Mission School district and was not diagnosed with dyslexia until spring of her junior year in High School (spring, 2017). Though I asked every teacher from kindergarten to sixth grade to help me figure out why she cried while doing her homework, why she struggled with spelling, why we can't read her handwriting and why she was not interested at all in reading, I never received any concrete or productive advice beyond, "she just needs to work harder." There were inconsistencies in her teacher's responses to my questions, which further frustrated my daughter and our family.

My husband and I read to my daughter regularly from infancy to third and fourth grade and we spent a lot of time exposing her to letters, numbers, words and doing everything parents are supposed to do when preparing their child for school. I expected a glowing report of a quick adjustment to kindergarten but that is not what I heard. Instead, the teacher said her work was very sloppy and she was somewhat frustrated. Since she presented verbally as a very bright girl the teacher suggested that perhaps we organize her desk a little more neatly at home. Perhaps the top of her desk was not organized and so her work was not organized. The teacher did not suspect dyslexia because our daughter did not reverse her letters when writing. I did ask my daughter's optometrist for a vision screen and to screen her for dyslexia just to be safe and he spent 15 minutes looking at this issue. He said there is no need to worry about dyslexia; she doesn't have it. Now, 12 years later, I know that dyslexia is not a visual problem and we asked the wrong specialist to rule out this diagnosis. It is a neurological problem. But, no one in our twelve years of persistent inquiry told us this fact.

My daughter was diagnosed very late and she did not benefit from the years of accommodations and special tutoring that students with earlier diagnoses have. She now faces the challenge of convincing colleges that she is worthy of acceptance and she faces the economic reality that due to her low grades, she does not qualify for merit based scholarships in an era of greatly inflated college costs. Undiagnosed dyslexia has severe economic consequences.

She was finally diagnosed with dyslexia after 12 years of struggling with public education because I, as her parent, happened to be listening to a radio program discussing dyslexia on National Public Radio which aired in November and December, 2016 (<https://www.npr.org/series/503544816/unlocking-dyslexia>) while driving my car around town. A young woman, the subject of the story, explained how the world looked through the eyes of a dyslexic person and it matched my daughter's description very closely. She did not talk about letter reversal at all. Rather, she talked about the difficulty recognizing sight words and processing their meaning, even after being exposed to those words numerous times. She talked about how very intelligent people can suffer with dyslexia and how receiving accommodations and tutoring for dyslexia changed the course of her education and opened opportunities. After listening to the story, I called my pediatrician's office and told them I wanted my daughter tested for dyslexia. They were not 100% sure of where to send my daughter for testing but said that it just so happened that a dyslexia tutor had recently given an in-service about 1 month prior to my call in their clinic office so I might contact her. I did call the dyslexia tutor who agreed that I should have my daughter tested. She

referred me to the Speech and Language clinic at Children's Mercy Hospital in Overland Park, KS. No teacher or medical person had ever suggested I take her to this clinic! Thank goodness for the good timing of hearing this radio program. Thank goodness the tutor had recently visited my pediatrician's office. Without such good timing, I never would have found this tutor who led me to the right specialist who diagnosed my daughter with dyslexia.

My daughter's test lasted 4 hours and the examiner came to a firm conclusion at the end of the session that she was indeed dyslexic. My daughter's first reaction was, "Oh my, I'm not stupid after all!" This was a relief after years of teachers doubting her intelligence and accusing her of not working hard enough. Beginning in Kindergarten, I asked each and every teacher for help figuring out why my daughter's handwriting was illegible and her spelling poor. I think it is important to give you a summary of the teacher's reactions when I asked for help. Why did she have so much trouble with sight words? Why did she cry each and bury her head in a pillow each and every time we worked on reading aloud? My husband and I have Ph.D.'s and we both teach at a University. Academics are a routine part of our lives and something we value highly. It always seemed odd that such an articulate child with so much parental support should have all this trouble with her subjects. Every teacher gave me a different explanation of her situation.

The kindergarten teacher said to me at my daughter's first conference, "Your daughter is very, very bright and articulate. I'm sure she will start reading when she is ready. Helping her to be organized might help her." In first grade, the teacher said, "Your daughter is very bright and I want to recommend some great games to enhance her learning. The games might help her to be more interested in the subjects." In second grade the teacher said, "I'm really frustrated. Your daughter is just not trying very hard. She should be doing better. She is smart. You need to tell her to work harder, especially with sight words and math tables. She is falling behind." I asked if there was any testing my daughter needed to pursue to identify a problem and the teacher said my daughter's only problem is that she doesn't work hard enough. She is too preoccupied with other things. In third grade, the teacher said, "Your daughter is just about average intelligence and you should be satisfied that she is just where she needs to be." In fifth grade, her grades started going down to C's and the teacher told me I would do my daughter a favor by just letting her do the things she liked, which were singing and dancing, and she would improve her grades when she is ready." I asked again if she could maybe have a tutor or some testing because I really sensed something was wrong. All her friends have A's and she is getting C's. The teacher said, "Well, parents should not get upset with C's. I had C's in school and look at me, now I'm a teacher. Just let her explore her artistic interests and she will start doing better in school when she is ready. Besides, we don't start testing and tutoring until kids have D's and F's."

So, I listened to the teacher as I did every year because I trusted the teachers as educational experts. The sixth grade teacher was visibly angry with my daughter. She called my husband and me in for conferences numerous times and she was very stern with our daughter. She told us we need to cancel any extracurricular activities and not let our daughter back into them until our daughter did her work. She reprimanded our daughter in front of us and in front of her entire class. The smart kids got a chance to see her sloppy writing, poor spelling and grades in this class because somehow, they leaked out and this was so humiliating that our daughter asked to switch to a new school. My daughter tells us that her teacher told her that with her bad work habits, she would get kicked out of the new school and she would not be very successful in life. She made it through middle school and struggled with some of her subjects and by high school her grades plummeted to D's and F's. We tried hiring expensive tutors at various points along the way and nothing helped. She wanted to do better but could not. I am firmly convinced that if she had been diagnosed with dyslexia in elementary school and received proper accommodations and tutoring, that she would have had a more normal childhood and she would be faced with more options for success. She has had accommodations for 2 semesters now and her grades have slowly started going up over the past two semesters. It's hard to fully bring up her grades though because she struggled through so much of the foundational work.

Dyslexia is genetic. In the process of reporting to my family about my daughter's diagnosis of dyslexia in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I discovered that I have several family members who grew up in the state of New York, where I grew up, who were identified 35 or more years ago as dyslexic. Their public schools immediately provided daily dyslexia tutoring and accommodations. Their initial problems

included all of those that my daughter displayed: poor handwriting, difficulty spelling, difficulty with sight words. These relatives of mine had dramatic improvements in their elementary school and high school grades and went on to get Masters and Doctorate degrees in their respective professional areas. They were and are each highly successful in their careers.

I really regret that she was not identified earlier and I firmly believe that the State of Kansas will dramatically improve the lives of many students and families, enhancing the happiness and well being of our community. I urge you to pass this legislation so that teachers and administrators have a full understanding of what dyslexia is, how to identify it, where to refer students and how to provide services.

Thank you.

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