

February 5, 2018

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee,

I am a Kansas parent writing to lend my support for House Bill 2602, the Dyslexia bill.

My youngest son is dyslexic. It is very hard to watch your child struggle and to not be able to offer him the help he needs.

Over time, my son's teachers told me they were worried about him; "he has difficulty memorizing things"; "he isn't really 'getting' reading"; "his writing is not really what we expect." They suggested I work more intensely with him at home. They suggested I work with him over the summer, I did all of those things. I flashed cards, drilled spelling words, practiced times tables and still, my son struggled. Out of my own frustration, I would ask "why is this so hard for you? - It's really not that hard." And my son would yell "I'm stupid!". "I'm not smart as everyone else, OK!?"

It's hard to say whether the saddest part of these exchanges were hearing my beautiful, bright boy say these words with conviction, or knowing my questions and attitude, contributed to his belief they were true.

Before his dyslexia diagnosis, my son spent two and half years, every day, working with his school's reading specialist and he still couldn't read at grade-level because the reading teacher didn't recognize the signs of dyslexia. Looking back, I find that astounding because as many as 20 percent of students have some level of dyslexia.

It's not that a dyslexic person can't be successful in school and beyond, it's that being dyslexic makes being successful much more difficult because you have to get through childhood and school first. You have to grow up and you have to get through school without giving up. Did you know that nearly half the prison population is dyslexic? Kids don't just end up incarcerated adults by accident. It takes a whole series of unfortunate events to bring a child to that particular low but it's not really hard to see how it could happen with a dyslexic child.

The first few years of school the dyslexic child struggles, but not everyone learns to read at the exact same time. Maybe he has a summer birthday so he's young for the grade, and everyone knows boys develop reading skills later than girls, so no one really worries. The teachers try to help, but they don't really know what they're dealing with, so the child falls behind. By third grade, all the kids know who the 'slow' kids in class are. The kids reading chapter books carry them around like trophies, cementing their social and intellectual superiority. The dyslexic kid picks a chapter book out of the library so his friends don't think he's different, but he can't read the book. He knows he's the 'slow' kid and so does everyone else. In fourth grade and beyond, he just can't keep up. He can't read the text books well enough to understand the information, and he surely can't spell. His handwriting is probably near illegible and the teacher gives him poor marks because, really, by now, he should know how to spell words like 'should' and 'force'. Only, he doesn't. He still spells phonetically so 'should' is 'shud' and 'force' is 'fors'.

After elementary school things get worse. Instead of one teacher, the child has many. They don't all get together to compare notes and concerns about this child. Are the teachers concerned? Of course they are, but they only see him for a part of each day. They don't necessarily know the big picture. They just see a kid that doesn't seem to be really trying, or maybe they see a kid that is trying, but it's too late for them to do much about it. They only have him for one hour and they have so many other kids to worry about too.

It's during these years the social groups are formed. The dyslexic kid is going to look around and try to find his place in the social order. Clearly, he's not going to hang with the 'smart kids'. If he's athletic, that could

be just the thing that saves him, but if he's not athletic, then he might look at the kids smoking under the bleachers and think 'well, there's a low bar I can certainly meet'. Next thing you know, our bright but dyslexic child is in with the 'wrong' crowd. This group reinforces how 'lame' school is. Maybe they cut class. Maybe some of the kids in this group have other serious issues and are self-medicating with alcohol or drugs. Bad behavior begets more bad behavior and then its detention, suspension, expulsion. It's too late.

Statistically speaking, children who don't read at grade-level by grade three will struggle with reading the rest of their lives. 3rd grade reading ability is also the single biggest predictor for failure in college and the likelihood of incarceration. That's a lot to put on an 8 year-old kid, but those are the stakes for a child who can't read by third grade.

The thing about dyslexia that's so challenging is that it's hard for adults to recognize the problem until it's too late and the child is behind and frustrated. It doesn't have to be this way. Scientists can prove a child is dyslexic even before they learn to read, but you have to know what you're looking for and you have to have the right tools. A dyslexic child can absolutely learn to read at the same age as other children. But, they have to be taught in a way that works for the way they learn.

What's really interesting about dyslexia is that, if it's caught early enough, scientists can demonstrate how a dyslexic child's brain can be trained to behave more like a normal reader's. Dyslexia can't be 'cured', but in the same way a young brain can learn languages better than an old brain, a young brain can be taught 'corrective' behaviors that may make reading easier to learn too. I'm not a neurobiologist, so I really can't explain it much better, but what I have learned is that there are things that can be done to help dyslexic learners overcome their reading challenges - especially if they are caught while the child is still young.

I am asking you to support this bill because Kansas does not currently have a clear, effective process for meeting the needs of dyslexic students. There are many, many great teachers in our classrooms, but they need training and materials to identify and ensure their dyslexic students are able to keep up with their typical-reading peers.

If our schools could recognize dyslexic characteristics in our youngest students, if these kids could be identified early and taught in a way that makes sense to them, a very young student may never fall behind the way my son has. At the very least, they may struggle less. Imagine the difference it would make to these children if they didn't have to go through the anguish of thinking they are stupid and less capable than their friends. How many lives would be changed if kids were made to understand they learn differently, but not less well, than others. How many dropouts would we prevent? How many more kids would successfully complete college? Who knows, but I bet it's quite a few.

So, what will be the end of my son's story? I am hopeful, all will end well. For my son, simply knowing there is a reason reading is hard for him, has made all the difference. He no longer says he's stupid. He has redoubled his efforts to try, no matter how hard the work is. It is beautiful and sad to watch.

Because I couldn't wait for my son's school to get the training and materials they need, for the past two and a half years, I have paid for private dyslexia reading remediation. I am extraordinarily fortunate to be able to afford private tutoring. Better still, I am a stay-at-home parent who can shuttle my son to his twice-weekly tutoring during school hours, and work closely with him and his teacher to make sure he gets the education he deserves. In the end, I estimate it will take about four years and an excess of \$10,000 to close the reading gap and ensure he has the reading skills he needs to advance through life.

And while I *can* pay to make sure my son has the reading foundation he needs, I struggle with the ethics of doing so. For every child like mine, who's family can afford private tutoring, how many kids in our state are

not so fortunate? Why should my child get the help he needs when he is no more deserving than any other? Every child should be taught to read, and it is unsettling to think that whether or not a child learns to read could be determined by whether his family can afford to pay for the appropriate instruction.

When a child falls behind, there can be lots of reasons, but the signs of dyslexia are well-documented. There is a well-researched and proven process for remediating. Our teachers cannot help our kids without the right materials, training and support. Our kids cannot succeed if they cannot read. Our districts cannot truthfully say they serve and support our children if so many are left behind without appropriate instruction. Our communities suffer when so many children exit school before graduation, defeated, and poorly-prepared to meet the challenges they will face as adults. And, in the end, it costs our community thousands of dollars to support those poor readers when they are illiterate adults.

Dyslexia is not just another disability, especially not in a world so extensively based on being able to read. As experts have pointed out, if you can't read, you can't make it in life. Lots of Kansas kids aren't making it.

Please, pass this bill so our schools have the resources they need to recognize and appropriately help a dyslexic reader before they fall behind. The benefits far outweigh the costs.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Erin Gould".

Erin Gould

Kansas parent, Johnson County

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