

Dear Madam Chairperson and Education Committee Members,

My name is Sara Johnson and I both reside and teach/tutor in the 4th Congressional District. I am writing in support of the proposed Dyslexia bills SF 116 / HF 1495 Dyslexia teacher professional development for recertification, SF 196 / HF 1494 Dyslexia teacher training requirement for teacher preparation programs, and SF 651 / HF 1496 Dyslexia screening requirement. I believe I offer a multi-faceted perspective as I was a public elementary school teacher for eight years who left classroom teaching to become a tutor for students with reading struggles and dyslexia. I also am the mother of two beautiful and unique children, one of whom is dyslexic.

It is my child with dyslexia who has brought to my attention the vast need for teacher education in the area of dyslexia. I was a classroom teacher for many years before I had my own children. I took part in teacher trainings and professional development often, as all teachers do, but it wasn't until I enrolled in an Orton-Gillingham course (as a means of understanding how and what my son would be learning with his tutor) that I realized what I was missing as a teacher of struggling readers and students with dyslexia. It was appalling to me that *what* I was being taught during that O-G course was not taught to EVERY teacher in the state who was charged with the duty of teaching children to read. I remember talking to family members, many of whom are or were in the teaching profession, every night after coming home from class about what I had learned and every single one of them had no idea what I was talking about. Not one teacher I knew had ever had any dyslexia training. A few mentioned that they "read a paragraph or two" in a special education course about dyslexia, but that was the extent of it. Fast forward four years and now I am a Certified Level II Orton-Gillingham Tutoring Specialist as well as a certified Wilson Dyslexia Practitioner. I left classroom teaching in the public sector because I finally learned HOW to teach students who struggle to read and who have dyslexia. Unfortunately, I couldn't put that effective teaching style to good use. I was told I needed to use the curriculum that the district provided. The curriculum that DID NOT WORK for the subset of students we are addressing with these bills.

Please consider adding professional development regarding teaching to the recertification requirement for current teachers. Many teachers are begging for help and more education on the subject. It is, however, going largely unnoticed by most of the governing bodies of education. Currently, I work as a teacher and tutor for struggling readers and students with dyslexia. I get phone calls, emails, texts, and even pleas in the grocery store from regular classroom teachers who, "Can't figure this student out," or tell me, "She is such a puzzle." After hearing about such students and combing over assessments, as well as anecdotal records, I often find that if the teachers only had the appropriate education they would be able to see that these students are in need of an explicit, multi-sensory, systematic way of teaching. They would see that these students, indeed, can learn within the teacher's classroom, but the material needs to be delivered differently. Without proper teacher training, these "puzzling" students will get interventions that are ineffective, wasting valuable time for the student and teacher and valuable resources that could be given to other students who need the commonly used reading interventions that many public schools are currently using.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development states that early intervention is critical to students with reading struggles and dyslexia. “When intervention is delayed, it takes four times as long to intervene in fourth grade as it does in late kindergarten because of brain development and because of the increase in content for students to learn as they grow older.” You have the power to pass legislation that would require early screening for dyslexia, thus shortening the time it takes for teachers to provide adequate reading intervention for these students. If students were identified early in the educational process instead of later in elementary or, for many of the dyslexic students I know, middle school or even high school, they would have a much better chance of keeping up with their peers. These students would learn the guiding rules and spelling patterns that are needed to decode written language when their brains are developmentally ready in the early grades, thus giving them a greater chance for success as they grow into reading to learn as opposed to simply learning to read.

Not only would early screening help identify students with dyslexia to help them gain a more appropriate education, but it would also help to alleviate the immense emotional trauma that many of these students endure. The fact that most dyslexic students have an average or above average IQ allows for them to take note of their reading abilities (or disabilities) at a very early age. They see their peers who are just like them, take to reading and start soaring, while they continue to work so hard at it and, yet, see few gains. The shame can run so deeply that it has been likened, by one psychologist, to that of incest. Let that sit with you for a bit.

In our personal family experience, I had to watch my son’s self-esteem plummet, not only in the classroom but in all aspects of his life. Once elementary school started and the push to learn to read was on, he retreated into himself. He stopped smiling that huge, toothy grin when he stepped off the bus after school. He started feeling sick and crying before school. One night he laid in bed, crying and said to me, “My reading teacher hates me. I never do anything right. He hates me.” HATE; the word we don’t use in our home because of its deep, dark meaning that elicits visceral responses from the giver of hate as well as the receiver of hate. It was a parenting moment we worked through in the end, but one that no child should have ever face. Did the teacher hate him? Of course not. But to our child who learns differently, the teacher was uneducated on the topic of dyslexia and thus proceeded to try to force the “square peg into the round hole” resulting in a chasm in their student-teacher relationship and creating an even greater disdain for school in my son. This all changed for the better when he was finally identified and we found him an Orton-Gillingham tutor, at our own expense, to teach him to read and spell. Not only did he make significant gains in the classroom, but he started walking a little taller. He started building random machines, towers, and art projects that months earlier he wouldn’t even have thought to attempt. He started taking on challenges in the sports arena that he previously didn’t have the confidence to conquer. He has grown into the confident and competent middle schooler that we knew he could be. Imagine if he had been identified in early childhood, how different his route could have been. We didn’t have the

luxury of waiting for legislation, as each day that passed and he did not receive appropriate services in school, he was missing valuable information that would continue to help him grow academically.

Every single day I see the toll that is being taken on these children who learn differently. I wake up every weekday morning and tutor children from public schools who are not getting what they need in their neighborhood schools. I proceed to my job as a teacher and tutor at a private school where my son is now a student. His needs are being met by the teachers within the school day. He is finally getting the “appropriate“ education he needs, albeit far from free. I then tutor students after the school day is over; Public school kids, whose needs are not being met in their own schools.

Our family story is not unlike countless other families in the state. Family after family is having to endure financial hardships in order to educate their children. We are the fortunate ones. We are the ones who somehow are able to find the money and have the sophistication to know where to look to provide the services that the public education system will not provide for our children. What about those who do not have the know-how and/or the financial resources to do so? Those families are stuck. They are stuck in a public school system that, for many, hasn't even identified their child as dyslexic. Of the few who have been identified, they do not have teachers who know how to teach these kids. The children who are stuck are the same children who will drop out of school before they graduate. These are the children who think they're stupid and they can't learn - which is far from the truth. They often turn to gangs for validation, they turn to crime... just take a look into the prison systems. They are filled with once-hopeful children who didn't have their learning needs met at the most basic level. They went to schools where their teachers were ill- to identify students with dyslexia and to teach to their learning style. This can be remedied for our current and future school children by the passing of the Dyslexia bills that are being presented today.

Thank you for your time,
Sara Johnson