

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee--

Last June, the U.S. Dept. of Education ranked Vermont as the worst state in the country in educating children with learning disabilities (IDEA Part B) with a grade of 54.86%.[1] This assessment of Vermont's failure to provide an appropriate education of children with learning disabilities should spur the Legislature to fix what has been broken for a long time.

As the parent of two children who were not identified as dyslexic until their fifth and seventh grades, I write in support of S.75. I have no interest other than to try to give all children the opportunity that my children have had.

Early identification of children with phonological deficits can make all the difference in the lives of affected Vermont children. There are almost twice as many dyslexic children (17 to 20%) as there are left-handed children (10%). Dyslexia affects about 20 percent of the population and is the most common of all neuro-cognitive disorders. (The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, 2017). Moreover, dyslexics are the vast majority of the learning-disabled population. About 80–90 percent of all those with learning disabilities have dyslexia.[2]

Dyslexia is a neurological condition that can be substantially remediated at relatively low cost if identified early. Early remediation may prevent a life-long learning disability of slow and difficult reading.

S.75 would require “screen[ing] for markers of dyslexia.” This screening would identify children needing more intensive instruction in evidence-based structured literacy. The screening would be a tool for informing both teachers and parents.

The envisioned screening would be wholly insufficient to make a diagnosis of dyslexia, which involves a battery of tests. The screening would, however, help teachers and parents understand and address challenges.

In reviewing Senators' questions, I heard two principal concerns, that identifying children with dyslexia might stigmatize them, and (unstated) was that it might raise costs.

1. Identifying children does not stigmatize them.

The idea was mentioned that identifying students with markers of dyslexia might stigmatize them.

Our family found not stigma, but empowerment. The identification of my children in the fifth and seventh grades was both a family crisis and a major turning point in our lives for the better.

For my children: the diagnosis revealed fairly obvious solutions, opened opportunities and empowered them.

- They learned that they were not stupid (though it took some while for that fact to become part of their self-image).
- They learned the phonemic reading skills they had lacked.
- They learned their specific limitations.
- Ultimately the diagnosis gave them the ability to advocate for themselves and to develop a personal insight of their limitations and strengths that was beyond their years.
- Further—and importantly—the diagnosis meant that they were entitled to accommodations for extra time in high-stake tests, such as the SAT.[3] With the time they needed to complete the tests, the test results reflected their substantive, actual knowledge rather than their rate of reading, which will always be slow. Also, IQ travels with reading ability.
- With better reading, their IQs jumped significantly.
- As a result, they had insights and opportunities that simply would never have existed without identification, remediation and recognition.

For their parents: with identification, we could understand their struggles and get (at mostly our own expense) the remediation that they needed. There is no question that the diagnosis—so late in their education (5th and 7th grades) presented a crisis. We removed them from the public schools, who were set in their non-phonemic ways and using misguided efforts that provided no hope. (Other families have moved out-of-state or had to send their children out-of-state.) Yet, we were fortunate throughout to have great support from knowledgeable people in our community,[4] who to this day are our heroes, rescuing our children from frustration and enforced mediocrity.

With a diagnosis, we could learn the science. We could insist on proper instruction according to the science of reading instruction, now known as Structured Literacy. We could improve their confidence by having them take advanced math courses. We could start listening to audiobooks in our car.

Before the diagnosis, I could only listen to assurances that they were doing okay with their average performance in school. The assurances came with no suggestions as to how matters could change. The diagnosis was a turning point in the lives of both of my children. Now one is a physician fighting cancer in Vermonters. The other is a chemical engineer working for the U.S. Patent office.

2. Screening will not raise costs and increase identification of students with learning disabilities

Early screening should reduce costs. Vermont—ranked last in the nation—has poor outcomes for children with learning disabilities.

Vermont's unfortunate and misguided "wait-to-fail" model of identifying children with learning disabilities means we identify children late, when the cost of remediation is high.

Giving schools and parents the tools to know who is at risk allows intervention at a time when intervention is relatively inexpensive. Research has shown that brain plasticity decreases through childhood. It takes four times as long to intervene in fourth grade as it does in late kindergarten (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) because of brain development.

Children at risk for reading failure can be reliably identified even before kindergarten. "Deficits in phonological awareness, rapid automatized naming, verbal working memory and letter knowledge have been shown to be robust precursors of dyslexia in children as young as age three." (Gaab, Harvard 2017) and Gaab on myth.

Children who get identified early and get science-based training in reading may never develop a learning disability, because the pathways in the brain are more adaptable at a kindergarten or first grade age.

"The persistent achievement gap poses serious consequences for dyslexic readers, including lower rates of high school graduation, higher levels of unemployment, and lower earnings because of lowered college attainment. Implementing effective reading programs early, even in preschool and kindergarten, offers the potential to reduce and perhaps even close the achievement gap between dyslexic and typical readers and bring their trajectories closer over time." (J Pediatrics 2015: 167:1121-5).

Conclusion

In the end, the question remains: how Vermont could have strayed so far from following the science of reading?

I am attaching a helpful article which explains the logic of reading and how the logic was lost. Hurford et al, "The Dyslexia Dilemma: A History of Ignorance, Complacency and Resistance in Colleges of Education" (Journal of Childhood & Developmental Disorders, 2016, v. 2, no. 3:26).

Reading is not a natural process. Reading is not encoded in our brains, like speech. Reading by the majority of citizens has been part of our culture for perhaps 300 years. Reading is the relating of symbols to sounds, putting the sounds together to become the sounds recognized as words in speech. The so-called "simple view of reading" is that Decoding x Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension. But the sounding out and memorization of the complicated spelling patterns of the English language is anything but simple.

Vermont needs to end the debate about what works. Follow the twenty-year-old findings of the National Reading Panel. My children were understandably baffled by the illogical 3-cueing system, such as “Reading Recovery,” but learned to read capably with a logical structured literacy model. Their reading will always be slow, but their relief was palpable and obvious and continues to this day. Vermont students need this relief. Vermont needs a right to read.

Sincerely yours,

Ted Hobson

Burlington, Vermont

[1] This is not a money question; Vermont has the sixth-highest spending per-pupil. In any ordinary world, being last in the nation in the education of children with learning disabilities is a crisis that requires focus and solutions.

[2] The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity. (2017). Dyslexia FAQ. <https://dyslexia.yale.edu/dyslexia/dyslexia-faq/>

[3] This extra time helps students with a learning disability in reading and does not seem to have a negative effect on ordinary students.

[4] Let me name a few: first and foremost, the late Trish McVeigh of Middlesex, who called me in the summer of 1999 to tell me that my son displayed the signs of a learning disability when he said that he hates to read. Shirley Bate, trenchant and incisive analyst and thinker, who diagnosed my children and gave me excellent advice throughout. Fran Rice, educational advocate par excellence, and still a dear friend, who advised me not to continue to battle the school bureaucracy in Middlesex. The late Barbara Zeilenga of Calais, who made learning to read great fun. There were many others who helped along the way.