

March 13, 2018 Statement by Barb Orsi Student Advocate & Parent of a Dyslexic Learner

Greetings, Committee Members,

Today, you are hearing about the frustration experienced in every district every day for years across Kansas by parents trying to do their job as parents. Although I too have been one of those parents, my child is now grown, and I come to you today as an advocate for these parents and their children as they navigate a system that was set up to assure their involvement, but that in practice, too often, merely patronizes them.

Because the State of Kansas has consistently refused to specifically insist that its schools flag, name, and effectively address the needs of our Dyslexic learners, in spite of the fact that they have been told to in IDEA, clarified several times by Dear Colleague Letters from the Offices of Special Education and Civil Rights,

- our schools deny their responsibility to address it;
- our teachers don't know how to recognize it, or how to address it;
- our universities do not train our teaching professionals to address it...

This, in spite of the fact that over 50 years of research and success has proven that it is real. We do know how to effectively address it. These children struggle, not because they cannot be taught. They struggle because in Kansas, we choose NOT to teach them.

As an Advocate, I have attended numerous meetings with parents seeking an appropriate education for their dyslexic minded children. When I first come on board at the invitation of a parent, I review the entire educational record of that student. I am often appalled by the school's response to the parents, once they are told of their child's diagnosis of Dyslexia. The Principal or someone else who should know better, and who I believe does know better, informs the parents that schools in Kansas

- a) do not recognize Dyslexia,
- b) just do not have to address Dyslexia, or
- c) consider Dyslexia a medical issue, not an educational one, and therefore the parents must address it on their own.

If, after forcing the issue, the school does choose to address it, they do so with very little true understanding of what Dyslexia is, and what it is not, how to effectively address it, and how NOT to address it. Paras, computer programs, incentive attempts, reteaching, but more slowly, and my very favorite, sight words drills....these are but a few of the haphazard, misdirected interventions I have encountered as I attend meetings trying to convince the schools to appropriately address dyslexic minded learners. We have Speech, Physical, and Occupational Therapy Professionals available in every school district; why do we not have skilled Reading Intervention Professionals as well? An inability to read, and therefore an inability to learn via reading, has a more profound effect on a student than an inability to pronounce a vocalic r, or

an inability to dribble a basketball. I have deep respect for these professionals, yet I cannot get my mind around the fact that in Kansas, we prioritize those skills above reading.

When a child is confined to a wheelchair, there is no discussion like this. The school would never tell the parents that the child is no different from any other student, because Kansas does not recognize confinement to a wheelchair. The school cannot insist that the stairs are adequate, and that the fault lies with the parents, or the child. The school cannot tell the parents that the burden is on them to carry their child into the school each day, either. Any child confined to a wheelchair is there clearly because of an underlying medical issue. Those parents are never told the problem is medical and therefore the school has no responsibility to modify anything. There is no doubt as to the merits of a ramp in order to assure that child has access to his or her federally mandated education.

A child with a dyslexic mind is not as apparent as a wheelchair-bound student. In fact, if we were not a print-based culture, we would only notice this sort of mind in terms of its assets: typically high thinking abilities when words are not the framework. These kids' scores tend to be highest in Non-Verbal Reasoning. Simply put, these kids think best without words.

If a child never went to school, and lived in a non-print environment, he would still walk, talk, eat, and function as a normal human being, but he would not read. All human brains are hardwired for those tasks, but reading for all of us is literally imposed upon our minds from the outside in. For the non-dyslexic learner, the same ability and drive to copy and assimilate what those around them are doing serves them well for learning to read too; that is why, regardless of socio-economic differences, a child from a reading home comes to school with a head-start. In fact, we even call the federal program to expose more children to a print environment before their school years "HEAD START"! A non-dyslexic student learns to read mostly by being exposed to it in a variety of ways, some explicit, some not.

A dyslexic minded student however will be frustrated as he or she strives to learn the same way. Dyslexic learners need to be explicitly, systematically, taught, to spell, to read, and to write, and the way they learn would work for the traditional learners as well! The Orton Gillingham methodology that we have had available for so many years is a perfect example of Universal Design at its best. At first glance, it seems to be a cumbersome accommodation for a few; but upon implementation, it becomes clear that it is in fact an improvement for all. Learning that way for a dyslexic learner is not just like a ramp, it is the elevator.

No one today would vote to do away with closed-captioned TV, especially all the sports bars in every city, which have blossomed because of an accommodation that was put in place to enable the deaf and hard of hearing to participate in our culture. Orton Gillingham is a scientifically and experience based method of teaching reading proven effective with over 50 years of use when delivered by a trained teacher. All readers will learn from its use in the classroom. The current way leaves out at least 20% of our students.

As I attend Eligibility and IEP meetings with parents, I fight to have the schools actually use the word “Dyslexia” in the documents, and to use the methodology we have seen work. They instead put Dyslexia under the parent concerns section, where no one pays any attention to it, and maybe they offer paras, and pull-out efforts that are basically more of the same. But by the time a child has been determined to be eligible for Special Ed, we are supposed to have ruled out a need for more of the same. According to our own state regulations, special education is supposed to be specially designed instruction (KAR 91-40-1(kkk); 34 CFR 300.39(a)(1)), and, specially designed instruction means adapting the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of a child that result from the child’s exceptionality to ensure access of the child to the general education curriculum in order to meet the educational standards that apply to all children (KAR 91-40-1 (III); 34 CFR 300.39(b)(3)(i-ii)) That is not what so many of our Kansas children with Dyslexic minds are receiving across Kansas today.

As a result of this flagrant ignorance of what Federal Law does, in fact, recognize and mandate to be addressed, the best most of these parents can wrangle in the way of “remediation” for their child is Para Support. And that Para, more often than not, is also “supporting” several other children at the same time. A para can help a child access the print, but cannot teach a dyslexic child to read that print himself or herself. A para is a stop-gap measure at best, to be used while the school effectively and intensely teaches that child to read. Too often, however, the Para is all there is, all the way from first grade, on into high school, and out into the world. Prepared for further education? Employment? Independent Living? How, if they cannot read beyond the most rudimentary level? How, if there is no para available for their college classes, no para to hold their hand in a job?

Reading for our society is the gateway to all other education. If you cannot read effectively by the end of fourth grade, that gateway is basically closed. The “stairs” for the Dyslexic mind is the fact that even today, the lions-share of education is delivered via print, and access to that print is via teaching that leaves the dyslexic minded student helplessly stranded on the sidewalk, unable to climb up and into further education. As schools resist evaluating these students, or, once evaluated, provide them with haphazard hit and miss attempts to teach them to read, in spite of all the evidence available as to the appropriate intervention, parents are trying to do their part in the system. They come to the meetings informed. They attempt to participate meaningfully. More often than not, they leave the meeting with an IEP that provides their child with Para-Support and nothing more. That is like providing that wheelchair bound student with a person to carry him up and down and in and out all day, as opposed to providing him with the wherewithal to be prepared, as the IDEA so simply and clearly puts it, “for further education, employment, and independent living”.