

## **Testimony in Favor of Bill 1131**

**Cooper Leininger**  
**cooperleininger@gmail.com**

My name is Cooper Leininger, I was a student of Alysia Budd's at Inspiring Minds my junior and senior year of high school, specifically for dyslexia tutoring. I am now a junior at UND majoring in Commercial Aviation. I have come today to share my story and give my testimony in support of Bill 1131 and the integration of Dyslexia Specialists into the school systems. A little bit about how I struggle with dyslexia; I have trouble with handwriting, spelling, some number issues and I omit letters when reading. I will go more in-depth later in the testimony. To start off I want to give the legislation a quick fact. Before I started tutoring with Alysia, my GPA was around the 2.0 mark, and I finished high school with a 2.6 cumulative GPA. My current cumulative GPA at UND is a 3.6 and I plan to keep it that way.

In our current school system, we are judged so heavily by our GPA, that once my GPA started to slip it was easier for me to play the role of a 2.0 student and not do an assignment. Teachers wouldn't ask questions, and I would not have to struggle through assignments. This turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy where teachers believed I was a student who did not care; therefore I started to not care. I would lie about my grades to my parents and friends because of how ashamed I was of them. I was doing the bare minimum to keep my GPA above the school's minimum so they would not reprimand me and so the school would allow me to play hockey and not tell my parents about how truly terrible I was actually doing. This was all fueled by the fact that the teachers and educators around me did not understand dyslexia and took my deficiencies as things I

simply could not do. It was demoralizing for teachers to believe that because I made simple spelling mistakes and simple mathematical errors that the limit of my mind's abilities was lesser than my peers. They would make feeble efforts to help me, in the same way they would help other students, but that simply did not work for me. They would assume I was acting stupid and wasting their time because I would be able to do a complicated part of an assignment but would continually get something simple wrong. Math for example, I understand college level algebra and have done pre-calculus, but sometimes I can look at a simple addition problem and that's the part that trips me up. My pre-calc teacher would not understand where my errors were coming from and why I couldn't do the problems correctly. To be fair, why should he? He should be able to expect a student in that class to multiply  $7 \times 8$  in their head without any problem. But things like this were the places I struggled and I, nor my teachers, understood why. In my mind I was stupid and just could not do the problems. I did not know why I would struggle so much; so how could a non-specialist help me if I didn't even know what I needed help with. There was a time in my science class that I was not understanding a part of balancing equations and after asking my question, he asked if I understood part X, I responded "yes". He then asked if I understood part Y, I responded "yes" again. He then asked, "if you get part X and Y, how do you not understand this?". I then said, "I get those two parts but how did you get the answer?". His response was, "you are clearly trying to waste class time and are intentionally being disrespectful". He then sent me out of class to the principal's office and assigned me detention. At that point I stopped asking questions because this is how a lot of my interactions would go with teachers. Although teachers would get frustrated, I was never one to be disrespectful. A

normal question scenario would be me presenting a question and ending with the teacher saying, “I don’t know what you are not getting about this.”

Just before starting my tutoring with Alysia, I was at probably the lowest point in my life. I was depressed and had lost all want to do good in school. Every time I tried, I either couldn’t, or teachers would belittle me for the questions I would ask. There is a point to this story of mine, and it’s simply that Alysia completely changed my life for the better. Students with dyslexia are easily left behind because of the things I previously talked about, but we are not stupid, or slower than other students, we just learn differently. This is the easiest way I can explain my experience with dyslexia; I learn differently, not slower. I don’t take longer nor am I less mentally abled. I needed to learn how I learn and how to help myself. I use plenty of tools to help me excel in higher education. I use text to speech, speech to text, change fonts in documents, spellchecker, and grammar checking. As another example of difference in learning, I have gone through three years of college and have not used a single notebook, nor have I taken hardly any notes on my computer or laptop. I have a 3.6 GPA and have less than one page of typed notes total. I have learned my learning style and figured out what works for me. These things don’t work for others just like the way others learn doesn’t work for me.

The reason this bill is important to me and why I am here today is my experience does not, and should not, be the experience of future students who have dyslexia. With correct intervention at a young age, kids can learn the way they need to learn and by the time they get to middle school or high school they will not have these problems. It is extremely important to screen kids at a young age and get them the help they need.

Most kids will go through the screening and nothing will come of it, but for the 1 in 5 that need a different style of learning, they could get that started right away. When I was in third grade, I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/ADHD). This was a wrong diagnosis, and I was put on meds that negatively affected my mood, appetite, and ultimately my physical and mental health. This misdiagnosis almost made it impossible for me to live out my childhood dreams of becoming a pilot. To obtain a FAA medical card you cannot be diagnosed with ADD or ADHD and cannot be on the stimulants used to treat ADD/ADHD. In order for me to get this diagnosis removed the FAA required me to do a very expensive and intensive psychological evaluation that took three eight hour days of testing. Over a year after applying for my medical card I was finally able to start flying. If I was able to be screened at the same time I was screened for ADD I would never have had these problems. To compound this, I did not get accepted to UND with my application. Due to my poor grades as a freshman and sophomore, I was unable to raise my cumulative GPA enough to reach their minimum GPA requirements. Although my grades improved tremendously my junior and senior years of high school, thanks to Alysia's tutoring and my wanting to learn, it simply wasn't enough. I had to speak with the Director of Admissions at UND to explain my situation and prove I had the ability to be successful at UND. I nearly had my dream of going to UND for pilot training taken away simply because I didn't get the appropriate help I needed soon enough. I have wanted to be a pilot since before I can remember. To say that my life would be on a very different path without Alysia is an understatement. I don't know what that path would look like, but I would not be the man I am today without the tutoring and skills she taught me in the short two years of tutoring I received.

For anyone that is passionate about something, being told “you can’t” is the worst, but also the most motivating thing you can hear. If I did not have such a strong passion for aviation, I guarantee I would have given up. But me not giving up and trying to get the help I needed, opened my eyes to the chaos of dealing with our school system. The only option the school had for me was to get a 504 plan, which ultimately did not help whatsoever. Talking with the school during my 504 planning was an experience so terrible I have almost eradicated it from my mind. My counselors and Principals' solutions were that I could be put in special education classes. I was then forced to go through their testing and scored above average in every area, proving that I did not need special education classes. Next, it was suggested that I could just go to a trade school instead of a four-year college. It was heart wrenching to hear my teachers, counselors, and principals throw away my dreams so quickly. Alysia was the only person who understood my mind and what I was going through. If it wasn't for my amazing mother and the work she did, I would have not gotten the help I needed.

Currently, I still struggle with different issues and use various tools to help myself excel at UND. To do the large amounts of research required for some classes I utilize text to speech software to read the articles to me. It's not because I can't read them, but because it is faster, and I can retain the information much better if I listen to it and only read parts of the articles. If I do read an article, I will copy and paste the articles into Word and change the font to one that is easier for me to read. When I read, I rely heavily on context to correct me when I read a word wrong. When I read, sometimes I end up reading the same sentence multiple times by accident, but the repetition really allows me to remember the content. I will look at words and omit letters and make new

words out of them that may not make sense, but it's what I see. The context of the articles will allow me to catch my mistake. As you can imagine, reading out loud in a class full of peers is quite embarrassing. It is true that I can't read as fast as some, but I am by no means below average for reading speed or comprehension. I believe my performance through three years of college is proof enough for that. When typing papers, I would not be able to survive without spellcheck and the define feature for words that could be similar. For example, collage and college are obviously very different but the spelling looks very similar. I can easily highlight and define them and figure out which one is correct. When someone sees me make mistakes like this, they can easily think I'm "going too fast" or just pass it off as I am dumb. I also still struggle with numbers and will mix them around sometimes, but this is very minor in my case. For this, having access to a simple calculator on my phone is more than enough to mitigate any problems I would have.

The things listed above are all things I still struggle with and work around, but it was the things I learned from Alysia that have allowed me to excel in higher education. My experiences with teachers and educators before Alysia were frustrating and futile, as they didn't know how to help. I didn't know what was wrong with my mind and why I was struggling so much. Alysia and tutors trained in dyslexia provide a place where I can make mistakes and have them explained to me in a way that makes sense to me. To this day, I won't write papers with people looking over my shoulder in fear of them judging me, but Alysia provided me with a place where I felt I could make the mistakes and not be judged. In my mind, tutors like Alysia are an easy patch to a relatively large hole in our education system. Countless people like me can benefit greatly from this bill.

Once implemented, students will not have to go through what I went through just to get the style of teaching they need and deserve. All in all, I do not care what you label it or what you call it. But the tutoring I received worked and all that's all that matters to me. I was finally getting answers to things that I had struggled with for years.

Thank you for your time and please feel free to contact me if I can help answer any questions that arise at a later date.