

Dyslexia is HARD...let's make it easier with professional development and early identification.

HB 1231 - SUPPORT Testimony

Kayla Effertz Kleven

kayla@olsoneffertz.com

1/18/2022, House Education Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the record my name is Kayla Effertz Kleven and today I take off my lobbyist badge and humbly put on my step mom badge of honor as I stand before you to support HB 1231.

My stepson was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia the summer going into his 7th grade. He is now in 8th grade. Today I will work hard at not airing my grievances, and rather tell our story in an effort to give an example of why this is such an important step forward in helping kids.

SCREENING FOR ALL

Every year since kindergarten at parent teacher conferences, I would ask--"Do you think he has dyslexia?" I was repeatedly told, no. He would be turning his letters, and that's just not the case. Finally in the summer entering into the 7th grade we decided to have him privately tested. I forget the exact labels, but know the summary said dyslexia is impacting his ability to learn, with many proficiency percentiles in the 1% level.

PROCESS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When we entered into the 7th grade with the diagnoses, we were filled with hope--finally, maybe we could have some answers of why my stepson was struggling so much. Sadly, we were greeted with more frustration. Let me be clear, I do believe that teachers and administrators did the best they knew how to help this 7th grader operating with a 1st to 3rd grade level of vocabulary and comprehension. There simply just was a gap in knowledge of what to do and where to start. I remember all too well the 2 hour meeting when I said to the room full of frustrated teachers and administrators, "This shouldn't be this hard to write IEP goals or understand if we start with tools or learning gaps." We were all learning together and while I was all in to do what I could, I couldn't help but think, what about all of the other children who aren't diagnosed, who don't have parents with the blessing of time to sit in frustration and demand to work through this "hard."

Fast forward to present day and we know now our best work as parents is to work on transitions to a new grade, new semester, and new routines. 90% of the time when I start the conversation with a new administrator or teacher I'm met with their personal experience with dyslexia---not strategies, plans, systems that are in place to support the child. When we are relying on personal experiences, we are still in a trial and error phase and not research based, proven methods.

Additionally, we find that while we have accommodations written into our IEP, many teachers simply don't have awareness of what that looks like for dyslexic students. The practice of accommodations for dyslexic students isn't normalized as we still battle retaking tests orally. Do not misinterpret my words---there are wonderful teachers but the knowledge to know how to implement or discover the right accommodations doesn't come standard in every college curriculum.

FUNDING

The part of this bill that will likely be noted in opposition or even neutral testimony is the absence of a fiscal note for a mandate. Please do not let that be the reason you vote no or amend this bill. I have always been opposed to unfunded mandates--until this experience. Throughout last year, I offered multiple times to write a check to the school or school foundation for additional tools, professional development, even time to pay teachers for collaboration or additional training. However everytime I offered, I was told--"No, there is plenty of money. We have resources for this." And you know what, maybe there's room to absorb one student's needs, but we can't rely on parents to privately test their students for dyslexia and then find tools that work by trial and error versus pathways of best practices. And until this becomes a priority for the state, unfortunately, it is just too easy to not deal with the "hard"--because let me tell you, dyslexia is more than letters backwards---it's hard and unique for every student.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't highlight the immediate crosswalk we have researched and observed between behavioral health challenges and students with learning disabilities like dyslexia. Last year my stepsons' diagnosis and accommodations were very new to other kids. We struggled and learned the hard way and know that more students will benefit from our struggles. This year, we have tools that work. We are grateful for teachers and building administrators that stuck it out with us. However the unexpected challenge we experienced in this past semester was bullying and teasing because of this strange label dyslexia. The school recognized this and has done some wonderful awareness activities but I can't help but struggle with the concept that the word dyslexia is all new for kids.

I thank you for your time, and working on something hard. I've attached my recommendations and thoughts on more work that can be done in this space. I will stand for any questions.