

Thursday, January 8, 2015

M.O.R.E. Commission, Special Education Select Working Group

Committee Question: "Systematic Challenges to Special Education & Possible Solutions"

Sue Haynie, Testimony

I am a parent of two dyslexic kids, President of NorwalkSEEKS, a member of Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut and a former member of the Norwalk Board of Education. My comments tonight are mine. FYI, Norwalk schools, thanks to two excellent Superintendents and Literacy How, is making unprecedented improvements in early literacy.

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) is the highest incidence category in the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) representing 31% of Connecticut special education students. About 80% or 18,000 of them are dyslexic. Dyslexia has been studied more than heart disease.

The problem with special education as it relates to dyslexia, in my opinion, is not a lack of funding. The system is fundamentally flawed. Some examples:

1. The Connecticut Foundations of Reading (CTFORT), a test of reading instruction, began in 2009 for PK-6 teacher candidates. Special education was added in 2013. The initial candidate failure rate at Connecticut's four largest education schools was close to 50%. Teachers who were already certified before the law began are not required to take the test.

Solution-Every K-6 and Special Education teacher, Reading Specialists and Principal, certified or not, should have the professional development to take and pass the CTFORT.

2. The continual shortage of new special education teachers is self-inflicted. Teacher pay is based on step and seniority, not need or expertise.

Solution-Allow the pay in historically hard-to-fill positions like special education to be market driven.

3. Staffing—school assignments are usually based on seniority with the same special education teacher remaining at a school for years. Dyslexia is much like a health condition; it requires a prescription for success. If the child hasn't been making progress and staff expertise is part of the problem, parent /district conflict is likely.

Solution-Give parents more choices.

Choice#1: Pilot a regional Literacy Center for Reading Disabled and Tier 3 kids and also make it a reading lab for professional development. It should be a charter school or a school where student need always trumps staff placement and retention.

Choice#2: Pilot a regional version of the McKay Scholarship; a Florida special education voucher program. It increases parental choice and controls costs.

My kids couldn't consistently read the word 'the' after 5 years of expensive 1-on-1 taxpayer-funded special education services at their local elementary school. I pulled them out and paid for 9 weeks of intensive reading instruction at LindaMoodBell. They came back readers and I had proven "Failure to Progress". Why couldn't the schools succeed? Why hadn't the staff been taught how to teach reading?

I think dyslexia in special education is a sleeping tiger. So, please, be bold with your reforms. The lawsuits Vegara in California and the Parents Union in New York are only litigations of State laws. IDEA is Federal law. 'Failure to Progress', what my two kids so quickly proved, is a direct violation of a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) under IDEA. And what happened to my two dyslexic kids is the rule, not the exception. There are 10's of 1,000's of stories just like mine.

Web Links:

McKay Scholarship Program: <http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/McKay/>
Vegara v. California: <http://studentsmatter.org/our-case/vergara-v-california-case-summary/>
Parents Union v. State of New York: <http://nylawyer.nylj.com/adgifs/decisions14/072914summons.pdf>
CT Foundations of Reading Test (CTFORT): <http://www.ct.nesinc.com/index.asp>

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<http://www.housedems.ct.gov/more/SPED/meetings.asp>

Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA): <http://idea.ed.gov/>

Free & Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/edlite-FAPE504.html>