

Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee
“Developmental Perspective on Testing for Dyslexia”
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I was asked to provide a testimony addressing the provision of accommodations for dyslexic students and the resources dyslexic students need to succeed in school and life. Dyslexic students, because of their creative thinking abilities, can be valuable additions to any classroom. They offer unique perspectives that can enrich learning for all students in the class. However, educators, parents, and classmates often misunderstand these students. Because they struggle with reading, writing, spelling, and even speaking, they are often perceived as lacking intelligence. Dyslexia is a deficit in the phonological functioning (the ability to manipulate the sounds of language) of the brain that results in difficulty or inability to decode even the simplest words. As a result, a highly intelligent student with great vocabulary and reasoning skills may not be able to decode words, preventing him from using his intelligence, vocabulary, and reasoning skills to make sense of what is printed on the page.

One way students with dyslexia can succeed in spite of their reading challenges is to provide them with accommodations. In addition to effective teaching, accommodations are the key to dyslexics' success in school. Some of the most common accommodations are tests read aloud and extended time for tests and assignments. Having a test or reading assignment read aloud or using text to speech software allows the student to access his knowledge and reasoning skills. Even for a student who has learned to read, reading is mechanical (not smooth) and laborious, thus resulting in insufficient cognitive desk space. Good readers recognize many thousands of words by sight; dyslexic readers tend to have to decode every word on the page as very few of them are instantly recognized. The student takes so long to read, and reading is so difficult, that he cannot think about what he is reading; he has limited cognitive desk space. Providing extended time for tests allows the student the opportunity to perhaps read and re-read the material and then to process what has been read.

Also, when tests require writing answers (as opposed to bubbling in answer sheets), the same amount of effort goes into formulating the answer and getting the words onto the page. Extended time is critical. Another option is to have the student dictate his answers either to a live person or using speech to text software. Being able to speak his answers eliminates the troublesome spelling and grammar problems associated with writing. Another valuable accommodation for dyslexic students is the ability to have a note-taker or copies of the teacher's notes for a class lecture. Because of the dyslexic's difficulty with printed words (reading and writing) the student should have access to the notes

while the lecture is going on so he or she can simply listen and enhance or highlight the given notes. All too often, students are forced to write notes while the teacher is talking, but again, there is limited cognitive desk space. He may get some words onto the page, but because it is such a struggle, he misses out of getting the gist of what the teacher says, and he cannot participate in discussions because of it. Imagine the overwhelming challenge of having to attend to each letter in printed words or each sound in spoken words before you can even begin to think about the meaning of the words.

These types of accommodations eliminate that burden. Unfortunately, many educators and testing companies believe that providing accommodations to some students is *not fair* to the others. Rick Lavoie, an educator for over 30 years and an advocate for students with learning disabilities, expresses that *fairness does not mean that everyone gets the same thing; fairness means that everyone gets what he or she needs to be successful*. When student are treated fairly by Rick Lavoie's definition, they can succeed and even thrive in the classroom.

What can Congress do to help students with dyslexia have the resources they need to succeed in life and school? As an educator who travels extensively throughout the state of Louisiana and into other states, I feel that there are two important issues at hand. One is the preparation of teachers at the college level. In 1997, Congress asked the NICHD and the US Department of Education to establish the National Reading Panel that would evaluate existing research and evidence to find the best ways of teaching children to read. The National Reading Panel submitted its final report in April 2000. In June 1999, Dr. Louisa Moats published a paper titled *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science* in which she elaborated on the importance of effective teacher preparation in reading instruction.

Now, over 15 years later, we still have young teachers in America's classrooms who have received minimal instruction at the college level on how to teach struggling readers. Where months of instruction in the structure of the English language and hands-on application are needed to be an effective reading teacher, particularly for students with dyslexia and similar learning disabilities, many teacher education candidates receive a simple glossing over of phonics. The research is there. It should guide the profession, and it should start in every teacher preparation program in the country. Then, the research should guide professional development for current teachers. As I travel to school districts around the country, providing professional development, I hear the same story, *we should have learned that in college*.

I realize that most decisions boil down to funding, but for the future of our children, we need to be sure that adequate funding is available for teachers (pre-service and in-service) to access high-quality teacher education programs that utilize the research and prepare teachers to teach ALL children. It is estimated that 1 in 5 children are dyslexic. It is not good enough to prepare teachers to teach 4 out of 5 children.

The second important issue, also dependent on funding, is the availability of resources in the public school systems. Right here in Louisiana there are huge discrepancies in what is available for dyslexic students. School districts are funded largely based on the tax base

of the parish. Is it fair that a student who is dyslexic in a poor rural parish cannot have access to the same effective teacher and assistive technology as a dyslexic student in a more prosperous district? Remember the *fairness* definition? Give the students what they need to succeed. Allocate federal funding for students with dyslexia.