

2/6/2018

Dear Mr. Vickrey and Mr. Aurand, about the Bill

My name is Ashley Niedzwiecki, and I am the mother of five kids. Like most parents my days are spent guiding and nurturing my children to become the best versions of themselves, with kind hearts and inquisitive minds. As any parent can attest to, this is not always an easy feat, as parenthood is full of challenges.

One such challenge is having to watch your child struggle. It can break your heart, but as parents we know that their struggles can make them stronger if we can just teach them how to grow and learn from their experiences. However, when my son Maddox was diagnosed with dyslexia last spring, at the age of 8, I felt an odd version of panic. This was a challenge I was not prepared for. How was I supposed to teach him to grow from an experience that would never go away? One that had the possibility to direct his future potential and stop him from achieving his goals. I had a hard time envisioning a future where something as innate as language would actually be a barrier for him.

Dyslexia is a lifetime diagnoses. This isn't something you recover from, this is who you are, and how you approach the world. Dyslexics are not broken though, and I immediately realized that a huge part of my job, and the job of the education system, would be to encourage him to see himself as the intelligent kid that he is. When Maddox was first diagnosed he cried. Although the struggle with sounds and reading had been something that was part of his life from the beginning (he did not even speak past a few words until almost 3), being labeled as dyslexic took some time to adjust to. He asked me if he would ever be 'normal' or smart. I was devastated. How could he see himself as anything but amazing? With the help of a gifted and insightful reading teacher, Jeri Powers, and the guidance of a Speech and Language Pathologists, Allison Winters, he slowly started to make improvements. It will be a long road though. Everything about our culture screams that to even be considered competent one must be a proficient reader. Yet according to some statistics 1 in 5 individuals have some sort of learning issue related to dyslexia.

We need to stop ignoring their needs. As a society it is our collective responsibility to embrace their differences and cultivate their potential. Therefore, it is so important that the people who can make change take on the responsibility of doing so, and it needs to start in our schools. Maddox was not diagnosed until half way through his 2nd grade year. Even though this is younger than some, it still puts him dangerously behind his classmates. Since schools cannot use the word dyslexia first, Maddox remained undiagnosed until I finally refused to believe that he would eventually catch up like I was always told he would. If educators are given the tools to recognize dyslexia and the backing by the state so that they are encouraged to share their thoughts with parents, we can help save so many kids from years of self-doubt. Maddox recently brought home a math test (a subject he likes because he is good at) in which he scored 100%. I, of course, told him how proud I was of him. When he didn't respond, I could tell that something was bothering him. He looked up at me and asked if it was wrong to lie, if that lie made someone feel better. When I questioned him further he told me that he had lied to a girl in his class and told her he got a 50% on his test. I asked him why and his response made me catch my breath. He said, "Because she doesn't do very well in math and I didn't want her to feel dumb. I know how that feels and it's not good." I guess he is learning from his struggles after all.

Thank you for your consideration on this very important matter.

Sincerely,

Ashley Niedzwiecki