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Kansas Senate Education Committee

Re: Senate Education Committee's consideration of HB 2602 –Task Force on Dyslexia

Dear Senators,

I am pleased to voice my support for the bill to create a dyslexia task force. Considering that as many as 20% of our population are on the dyslexia spectrum, that screening for dyslexia is simple, and that there are proven, evidence-based teaching methods that help dyslexic students (of all ages) succeed, this legislation is simply common sense, and a long-awaited step in the right direction for Kansas. I hope that you will support it.

As you likely know, dyslexic people have difficulty reading and spelling. Even once their reading skills improve, they are often horrible spellers, well into adulthood. I am not dyslexic. In fact, I am a spelling-bee-winner type. Sadly, one of my long-held prejudices was that people who cannot spell well must not be intelligent. I am ashamed of once believing that. What I didn't know, until I began a journey of educating our family about dyslexia, is that although dyslexic people have these weaknesses, they are often brilliant and incredibly creative people.

The names Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, Walt Disney, George Washington, and Steven Spielberg are examples of dyslexic individuals who struggled in their education but went on to achieve great things. There are countless others. And will be countless more. My 9-year-old daughter, Sinclair, may be among them. Though she is severely dyslexic, she is also gifted in some areas. She has creativity and gifts I do not possess and could never have understood without knowing her.

As is too often the story of dyslexic children in Kansas, my daughter's elementary teachers seemed to have no idea that the struggles she demonstrated in Kindergarten, first and second grades were signs of dyslexia. I asked. They shrugged their shoulders. Kind, wonderful, caring teachers just didn't have the education or tools to identify or address Sinclair's dyslexia. And had they known, they likely would have referred me to private testing and tutors, which is what I did eventually to help her succeed. Her teachers knew that she was anxious when tested. She cried a lot at school. Reading was strange and slow and painful. She couldn't succeed on timed math tests. Spelling was impossible. And even if she crammed for a spelling test and spelled some words correctly, she couldn't spell those same words a day later.

Looking back now, it is incredibly painful to remember the things I saw in her early education that were obvious, plain examples of dyslexia. Anyone trained in spotting dyslexia would have looked at the incoherent string of letters in Sinclair's first-grade writing efforts and said – "dyslexia and dysgraphia." Literally anyone. Her dyslexia is "text book," as they say. But not

even the fantastic educators we encountered in the Andover school district were empowered to identify it.

The story of many *succeeding* dyslexic children is probably similar to my daughter's. A tenacious parent seeks answers outside of public education and figures it out. Then the parent prepares to advocate on behalf of the child with regular and special educators for accommodations or an IEP, all the while agonizing and knowing that if certain, proven teaching methods were employed in the classroom (that benefit all children) or even in the reading lab, the child would *truly* benefit from school and the struggles could end.

I suppose Sinclair is lucky. That I have the education, the tenacity and the means to have figured out what caused her painful struggles. Lucky that I had the wherewithal to pursue an answer for her. Why does my sweet, social child cry about going to school and have stomach aches every morning? It just didn't add up. So I dug in and figured it out. Then I advocated for her to receive accommodations and eventually an IEP.

But my greater concern is for the children who don't have such a parent and advocate. Studies have shown that our criminal justice system is full of illiterate and dyslexic individuals. Students who struggle with dyslexia, who are not identified and taught properly, often end up depressed, feel worthless and even wind up in jail. Forming a task force on dyslexia, and hopefully, implementing screening and teaching methods in Kansas will help these students as well as those who have an advocate. All of society will benefit from helping all children with dyslexia to succeed. There is no question that Kansas stands to benefit greatly from implementation of a dyslexia task force.

My journey to understand dyslexia has been interesting and is, perhaps, relatable. When I grew up in the 1970's and 80's I never heard the word dyslexia. Maybe it is because, though it was not a new concept, it was still regarded by some as an unscientific concept. Something that couldn't be proven. Many thought that maybe dyslexic (or learning disabled) individuals were just slow, dumb or lazy. But, thanks in great part to The Yale University Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, there now exists a remarkable body of science demonstrating the different brain function of dyslexic persons. And even more exciting, this neurobiological evidence *proves* that once the evidence-based teaching methods are given to dyslexic persons, their brains function differently when reading. We can retrain the brain. And scientific evidence, including MRI evidence of brain function, proved this. This science didn't yet fully exist when I was in school, and it may be why I didn't hear the word, "dyslexia" when I was growing up. But dyslexia can no longer be regarded as a vague or hidden disability. The science and certainty of dyslexia, as well as the certain ability to help dyslexic students read, is precisely why Kansas must embrace the word dyslexia and create a task force as a first step.

My daughter, Sinclair, is now a happy fourth grader. She has received private language therapy for a couple of years, and receives special education *including* (as of this year), some evidence-based reading instruction in her Kansas public school! I am grateful every day for her teachers and school administrators. They are truly caring and wonderful. But I imagine how much more they could do in the lives of students who may now be regarded as simply anxious or unfocused (as my daughter once was thought to be) when one day, all Kansas students are appropriately

screened for dyslexia and provided scientifically proven methods of teaching reading and spelling. Please support the bill for creation of a legislative task force on dyslexia.

Sincerely,

*Alisa Nickel Ehrlich*

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