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My daughter knew most of the letters of the alphabet by age two. I found a progress note from her pre-K teacher recently that noted that she “forms her letters well and has a grasp of sentence structure not usually seen in 4 year olds.” Her Kindergarten teacher noted that she was her only student that answered questions in complete sentences which, she shared, would really help her as a writer. That same kindergarten teacher also pulled out a plastic slinky and told me that my daughter was struggling with pulling sounds apart and putting them back together again. I still remember her pulling the slinky apart and bringing it together, again and again. At that point in time, I didn’t know what phonemic awareness was; I just knew that my sweet, and always happy daughter cried every night when it was time for homework.

By first grade, my daughter who had loved to have me read to her, was throwing books across the room at bedtime, afraid that I might ask her to read to me. By second grade she was carrying thick books, books that she couldn’t begin to read, to and from school – so that she could look like all her friends. She spent hours each week preparing for spelling tests only to misspell all but a few words. Her teachers worked with her, and gave her different spelling homework, but nothing changed, except she grew further behind. There was often acceptance for the accommodations I requested, but no one ever used the word dyslexia with me.

It was through my own research that I learned about dyslexia and realized that my daughter’s kindergarten teacher had shown me exactly what was wrong when she used her slinky. My daughter lacked phonemic awareness skills and without the ability to hear sounds and connect them to letters, all the reading instruction she had received hadn’t begun to make sense. I sought an evaluation outside of school and learned that my daughter has dyslexia.

I immediately had her begin working with a tutor two hours a week and she got an IEP at school. Unfortunately, her teachers and special ed instructor had virtually no education in dyslexia. In every IEP meeting I would bring research and do my best to educate, but my daughter continued to fall behind. In fifth grade my daughter read at a third grade level and I was told, as we were preparing for sixth grade, that once she reached middle school they would no longer be working on learning how to read. At that point I withdrew my daughter from public school and she began attending a private school for learning disabilities. In four months she gained two years in reading and has continued progressing in decoding, comprehension and writing. All of which are impacted by dyslexia.

This could have gone so differently. In a state with strong dyslexia practices my daughter would have been identified in Kindergarten and, according to research, with the proper intervention beginning in Kindergarten may have NEVER shown any gaps in her reading. At this point, according to research, she may always struggle, even though she can successfully read grade level text.

Kansas needs dyslexia screening and research based multi-sensory, structured literacy instruction. We need it to be daily and intensive enough to make a difference. We need it provided by highly trained teachers (as opposed to computer programs that are currently being used), and we need this level of education throughout high school for those children who have already been left behind.

Thank you for reading about our experience. My daughter, who once cried every night, now happily does her homework. She said it best when I first told her that I was thinking about sending her to a new school that specialized in dyslexia – “Please let me go, Mom. PLEASE! I want to learn, and they don’t know how to teach me!”