

## **Dyslexia and Other Learning Disabilities** ***What Connecticut's Next Governor Can Do***

- ❑ **One of the greatest challenges we face in Connecticut is our need to reduce the achievement gap in state education. One of the greatest challenges we face as a nation is to make significant improvements in grade level reading, especially by the end of third grade.**
- ❑ **The recurring annual economic cost if we don't succeed is substantially larger than the recession Connecticut is currently experiencing (\$50 billion nationally).**
- ❑ **Dyslexia and other learning disabilities affect 10% or more of all students in CT and in the nation.**
- ❑ **Failure to improve educational services for kids with dyslexia will, therefore, make it impossible to close the achievement gap in CT and significantly improve grade level reading in America.**
- ❑ **Here's how our next Governor and State Legislature can prevent that from happening—and perhaps provide a model for other states and school districts across the country.**
- ❑ **Implementing these reforms will allow all students, including those who learn differently, the “chance to be exceptional, without exception.”**

Talk about education reform is everywhere. It is shaping educational policy and funding from Washington (*Race to the Top*). It's prompting plans from Connecticut's capitol to help close this state's achievement gap, the largest in the nation. It's requiring school districts to do things differently, to do things now, and to avoid the fate of the educational Titanic that characterizes education in CT and elsewhere.

Unlike those on the ill-fated ship, people in Connecticut can foresee what's ahead for the second wealthiest state. 574,000 public school students are not keeping up globally, in spite of an investment of \$11,864 per student/yr (1.3 x national average spending). Our students rank 25/30 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores among industrialized countries and 8<sup>th</sup> nationally in academic achievement. Population projections show Connecticut's future workforce to mostly be young adults who fall at the low end of the race/ethnicity/income achievement gap. This group of future workers face additional odds. Low-income, Hispanic and Black students receive significantly more special education services than students in other population groups. They are among the 10-15% of the state's children who live with the stigma of having a learning disability (LD) because they *learn differently*.<sup>1</sup>

Because individuals with LD learn in different ways than those without LD, they (and their families) face many obstacles to getting the best education. Low self-esteem, emotional and behavioral problems, risky behaviors like substance abuse, low achievement, dropping out of high school, prison, and unemployment take them down at far greater rates than their non-LD peers.

But learning disabilities do not have to be a stigma or, for some, a pipeline to prison. By building on recent legislative efforts to close the achievement gap, policy-makers *can* chart a course that transports every student to a productive future where they meet their potential, whatever their abilities and strengths—even, perhaps to a seat in the Governor's or President's office. With better understanding, high standards, highly qualified teachers and individualized academic support, students who learn differently can succeed. Now is the time for the 10-15% of kids who are learning disabled to have the “*chance to be exceptional, without exception*”.

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<sup>1</sup> Although students with LD may have high, average or low intelligence, the disorder affects their brain's ability to receive, process, store, and respond to information. LD shows up in and impacts individuals in different ways. Dyslexia compromises the ability to read, write, and spell. It affects 80% of those with LD, making it one of the most common forms. Dyslexia and LD make up about one-third of all literacy failure groups and require the right intense interventions as early as possible, so children can master this important life skill by the end of third grade.

## Recommendations for Closing The LD Achievement Gap\*

In order to narrow the Achievement Gap by 2015 Connecticut must put reading front and center for educators and their students. We recommend that CT's leaders:

**1. Promote a strong start with high quality Early Education (pre-K to grade 3) and high standards at every level** to identify children with LD and help them early.

- Maintain funding for universal access to high quality pre-K and full-day kindergarten.
- Ensure accountability by implementing Common Core Standards in K-grade 12.

**2. Ensure well-qualified educators at every level and stage of professional growth—pre-k-grade 12, general and special education, and administration.** The primary responsibility of pre-K–3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers is to teach children to read and yet all teachers encounter students who struggle. Increasing every educator's expertise in literacy development and instruction is vital.

- *Leadership:* Empower leaders with knowledge about LD and literacy by requiring appropriate coursework for *sixth-year* candidates and all administrators.
- *Pre-service:* Work with the Commissioners of Education and Higher Education, State Board of Education, and the State Department of Education (SDE) to pass policy for licensure regulations to: a) Align pre-K credentials with quality standards; B.A. for lead teachers, CDA or equivalent for assistant teachers; b) require more rigorous coursework and experience in research-based practices for all teaching candidates; and c) Require special education candidates to pass CT Foundations of Reading Test for licensure.
- *In-service:* Propose language in the legislative bill that specifies Continuing Education Units (CEU) requirements to a) Provide at least 15 hrs/yr training for pre-K teachers; b) require rigorous CEU process and contents (especially reading) to fill vital teacher knowledge and practice gaps rather than wasted "seat time." \*\*

**3. Require implementation of *Scientific Research-Based Interventions: CT's Framework for Response to Intervention (SRBI)* by highly trained professionals.**

- SDE should encourage and provide technical assistance to bring SRBI to scale in PREK in CT, and provide an annual report on their progress in doing so.
- In keeping with federal mandates and legal requirements, SDE should ensure that RTI is not used to delay providing services to children with LD.
- SDE should produce a report in 2011 that looks at how RTI has been used in a select group of diverse school districts in CT to determine whether LEAs are adhering to federal guidance and requirements.

**4. Support parents and caregivers as their children's first teachers** by creating school-based family resource learning centers where parents are given useful information about their child's progress in school and are taught how to support their child's early literacy development and individual learning needs.

- Discuss the language and literacy needs of English Language Learners with their parents while encouraging them to read and speak to their children in their native tongue.
- Promote and support empowerment programs, such the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) and Parents Supporting Excellence in Education (Parent SEE).

**5. Promote the use of new and assistive technologies to improve access to learning environments without barriers, engage students and maximize their success.**

- A number of school districts used IDEA funds to pilot the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), an approach to teaching, learning, and assessment that draws on new brain research and new media technologies to respond to individual learners' differences. SDE should randomly select a number of these schools to report their results in order to share 'lessons learned' with other districts.

**6. Provide LD students with transitional support to increase options and insure success as they move through Higher Education.**

- Work with the Commissioner of Education and SDE to ensure that students and parents be included in transitional planning for college prep and school-to-work.

\* All of these recommendations would incur no additional cost.

\*\* Language included in HB No. 939 in 2009.