

Dyslexia Speech for School Board Meeting

Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley

Dyslexia Training Institute

Well, we did it. Tracy and I went to the San Diego Unified School Board meeting and expressed our concern about the lack of instruction and identification of dyslexia. We attempted to educate the board within the three minutes we each had. I would love to report that it was a transformative experience and that they get it, but then I would be lying. While we are unsure of the impact of our statements, we are sure that we helped someone in that room and we exercised our rights as citizens to express concern about the public education system. What we can promise is that we will be back and we may be back every month until they do more than nod their heads.

Below is the speech that I wrote and delivered. Feel free to adapt if for your own use.

As you probably know, Autism affects one in 52 children which is 2% of the population. So, every school in San Diego Unified is affected by autism. What you might not know is the dyslexia affects 1 in 5 children, that is 20% of the students in your district. This means that in every *classroom* from kindergarten to twelfth grade sits a child, and probably 2 or 3, who have dyslexia – that’s a lot of kids. And to be sure, dyslexia is real. In fact, congress also agreed that it was real when it included dyslexia as a qualifying condition under the Special Education eligibility category of Specific Learning Disability and this was in 1975. Since that time we have collected a tremendous amount of evidence (point to books) about how dyslexia is manifested in the brain, how it manifests in the classroom, the genetic component of dyslexia, but more importantly, we know what works for students with dyslexia. Despite this mountain of research that has been well documented and is available to anyone interested in laymen’s terms, we attend IEP meetings on a regular basis in the SDUSD where the IEP team repeatedly tells parents that dyslexia does not exist, that it is a broad term (which it is not, it is SLD is the broad term), that SDUSD does not work with dyslexia and the list of unfounded comments goes on and on. Our concern tonight is that these bright children are marginalized despite the vast amount of research. They are held back and asked to change, when the instruction is what needs to change. They are denied their potential due to schools continued lack of education in the area of dyslexia. This is a civil rights issue. When twenty percent of a school district struggles to read and spell because of dyslexia and the district refuses to respond with an appropriate intervention, they fail not only to provide FAPE on a regular basis, but they violate the civil right to an appropriate education.

Tonight we implore you, we beg you, to make dyslexia a priority in your professional development as you are urged to do in CA statute 56245 which states, “The Legislature

encourages the inclusion, in local in-service training programs for regular education teachers and special education teachers in local educational agencies, of a component on the recognition of, and teaching strategies for, specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia and related disorders.’

Imagine being a smart kid sitting in class day after day, failing day after day, despite knowing you were smart. Imagine being told to ‘work harder,’ ‘focus,’ or to ‘try harder.’ Imagine that you know you have, dyslexia, yet, you are told it doesn’t exist. Every day you are told to be more motivated. A student who fails day after day and continues to try is not lacking motivation. Imagine being the parents and advocates of these children with the current and research-based information about dyslexia and being told the school will not help. Imagine sitting in IEP after IEP and listening to educators continue to spread myths and misconceptions that have long since been debunked. Is that not a civil rights issue? These kids are being told to sit in the back of the bus, while those who do not have dyslexia are treated to the education they deserve.

Dyslexia is real and SDUSD owes it to these to kids to allow them to reach their potential.

I will leave you with these last two thoughts. The first is from the preeminent researcher in dyslexia, Dr. Sally Shaywitz, who states, “We do not have a knowledge gap, we have an action gap.”

Lastly, I would like to assure you that if the schools fought as hard for those with dyslexia, as they do against it, you would have a completely different and substantially less impacted special education system.