

**Testimony before the
U.S. Senate Health Education Labor Pensions Committee**

**Understanding Dyslexia:
The Intersection of Scientific Research & Education**

May 10, 2016

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Good Morning Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, Senator Cassidy, Senator Mikulski, members of the HELP Committee, fellow witnesses, and attendees.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to share my family's story of living with dyslexia.

My name is April Hanrath. I am the proud mother of Jocelyn, who is a senior in high school in our hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. I am also a Parent Advocate with Understood, a free comprehensive online resource for parents of children with learning and attention issues.

I am honored to share our journey with dyslexia as we navigated through the educational system in Utah.

But I also recognize that we are not alone in this journey.

Over 2 million children have learning disabilities, most of whom struggle with reading. And the National Center for Learning Disabilities estimates that another 15% of students struggle in school due to an unidentified learning or attention issue.

So, I sit before you eager to tell our story but hopeful you will have an opportunity to meet parents from your states who face similar challenges and successes.

Through my testimony, I hope you will hear 3 messages come through loud and clear:

- First, it is critically important to identify learning disabilities like dyslexia in early elementary school.
- Second, we must support general and special educators by giving them training about dyslexia and learning disabilities, co-occurring issues, and necessary accommodations.
- And third, and most importantly, all of us must have high expectations for students with dyslexia. Policymakers, educators and families alike must recognize that students like Jocelyn are fully capable of excelling in school and college.

My daughter, Jocelyn is proof that when you hold students with dyslexia to high standards and provide them with the tools they need to succeed, they are able to fulfill their goals and dreams.

So, let me tell you a little about Jocelyn, who is sitting right behind me.

Jocelyn is a driven, bright young woman who has excelled in school and soccer. In everything she does, she holds herself to a high standard; and failure has never been an option for her.

Yes, Jocelyn has learning disabilities, as she is dyslexic, but she has never used her challenges as an excuse to not achieve. In fact, it has only motivated her to work harder.

Next month, Jocelyn will graduate high school with a GPA of over 3.7. Next year she will enroll in Highline Community College in Washington state with a soccer scholarship and an internship with the Seattle Reign, the professional women's soccer team.

And after that, she plans to finish college at a 4-year school to earn her degree in sports management with a sports psychology minor.

To support her goals, I am proud to say that Jocelyn received the 2016 Allegra Ford Thomas Scholarship from the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

That's Jocelyn now – but over the last 13 years, we've had our ups and downs.

When Jocelyn was in fourth grade, she was struggling with reading and started becoming withdrawn from school.

At the end of fourth grade, Jocelyn was evaluated for special education and found to have an above average IQ with significant dyslexia, poor fine motor skills, and severe test anxiety. She has also had challenges with writing, known as dysgraphia; keeping herself organized and managing time, known as executive functioning; and difficulty with focusing, like ADHD.

Looking back, I wish Jocelyn's needs were addressed earlier than 4th grade, a time when reading is an integral part of nearly every class in school.

Starting in 5th grade and largely continuing to today, Jocelyn has received accommodations like extra time, oral testing and using a computer rather than having to hand write assignments.

These accommodations have made a huge difference for Jocelyn because they allow her teachers to teach her in a way that works for her. And they allow her to show what she knows in a more accurate way.

But for me, as her mother, what is of paramount importance is that Jocelyn has always been taught to the grade level she is enrolled in alongside her peers. And, accommodations have allowed Jocelyn to access the grade level content, and even above grade level content.

In fact, starting as a freshman and continuing throughout her four years at East High School, Jocelyn took honors and AP classes in addition to her regular classes.

It was an amazing special education teacher, Carrie Szumnarski, who helped Jocelyn navigate some challenging situations along the way.

For example:

- When some of Jocelyn's teachers were unfamiliar with dyslexia, Jocelyn, Carrie and I helped educate them to dispel the myth that dyslexia is a sign of a low IQ.

Or:

- When some of Jocelyn's teachers were reluctant to give her accommodations, Jocelyn used the self-advocacy skills Carrie helped her develop to explain what accommodations are and why she needed them.

And:

- When some of Jocelyn's friends joked around about being dyslexic when they made mistakes reading aloud in class, Jocelyn used that opportunity to share that she was dyslexic and explain what it's like to be dyslexic.

Throughout our journey we have used all of these experiences to help others understand what dyslexia is – and importantly what it isn't. Resources like the Understood.org and the National Center for Learning Disabilities have helped us along the way.

These last 13 years taught me that while the educational system is not created with dyslexics in mind, with the right information, training and support students with dyslexia can thrive.

I can say that I am a better mother and person because of our journey and that Jocelyn's future is limitless because she is an amazing young woman with much to give the world.