

Dyslexia Interim Study Committee Testimony

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Helen Macik

Chairman Deuell and members of the Committee:

I am Helen Macik, the incoming President of ALTA, the Academic Language Therapy Association, a non-profit organization based in Dallas that certifies therapists throughout the United States and Britain who treat individuals identified with dyslexia and related disorders. ALTA provides continuing education and sets high ethical standards for the industry. Texas has for many years been the leader worldwide in dyslexia testing and research, the reason why our national office is in Dallas. It is also why ALTA is looked to as the leading resource organization on dyslexia and related disorders.

ALTA was created in 1986 with the idea of establishing a professional association for those who work with individuals who have reading, writing, and/or spelling disorders. Since its inception the association has served as a clearinghouse for information and assistance to parents and teachers about dyslexia and related disorders. It operates a telephone and online referral helpline, a speaker's bureau and provides information on scholarship opportunities.

ALTA members have met rigorous standards of post-baccalaureate education, successfully passed a national exam and participate in continuing education each year. Some work in schools, some in clinics and others in private practice.

I am an academic language therapist and I also wear the hat of an educational diagnostician. Since the 1980's I have tested both children and adults because of poor school and work performance. Often I have had the opportunity to re-test the same individual a second time after several years. I have found that if the individual was able to work with an instructor who had a high level of training the achievement scores greatly improved from the first testing session. The gaps caused by weak skills in auditory & phonological processing, poor visual processing, processing speed and working memory diminished and in some cases were closed and the individual was able to achieve commensurate with peers.

However, I have also seen the opposite happen. When the student was not able to work with a trained therapist the gap became wider and the student was not

academically successful. As an academic language therapist and a middle school teacher I had many students who had written themselves off as a failure. Often they told me "why should I believe you can teach me to read, I have had teachers tell me that every year." Luckily, I was able to convince many to work with me, but others had lost the confidence to trust. The reward came later in the year when I would hear, "I didn't know I could read" or "I have never read a whole book until this year", "This is the first year I have passed -the state test" and my favorite was "You know I never thought I could go to college but now I think I can."

I cannot tell you how rewarding it is to take a child or an adult identified with dyslexia or related disorders from a non-reader to one who can decode and comprehend the written word. This does not happen overnight. It is a long, intense process utilizing multi-sensory techniques, often requiring one-on-one therapy. The most severe dyslexic might require hourly sessions every day for several years to achieve basic levels of comprehension. This intense intervention is difficult to achieve in the regular classroom and often the student has private therapy outside of the school day.

One of our concerns today is the issue of early identification of individuals with dyslexia. According to the International Dyslexia Association, 1 in 5 individuals or 15-20 % of the population has a reading disorder.

Ideally, you think we would catch this disorder in the first couple of years of school, but as I mentioned, I find middle-school students who cannot read. We must continue to develop a better system of early detection and also teacher training. Teachers from K through 12 should be provided with information in order to understand and know the signs of dyslexia. Schools must work to provide a process for referral and testing for those students showing signs of dyslexia. What does the parent or teacher look for? The best indication is when parents or teachers observe that despite average or above average intelligence, a student is not able to decode the written word.

Another big concern is ineffective intervention once a child is identified. Some schools have highly trained therapists who do an excellent job remediating children with dyslexia and related disorders. And some don't. There is little consistency across the state or from school to school within a particular school district.

Some schools send classroom teachers for a short training seminar in dyslexia techniques and assume that is sufficient for remediating a dyslexic student. Those same teachers are often thrilled if a qualified language therapist enters the picture. Teaching a dyslexic child with inadequate training is a very frustrating experience.

The need for more highly-trained dyslexia therapists in Texas is great. There are eight IMSLEC accredited multi-sensory training centers in Texas. IMSLEC, the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council accredits training courses that prepare individuals in the use of multisensory structured language education programs. The training provided by IMSLEC accredited courses meets the requirements set by ALTA to sit for the Alliance National Registration Exam and for certification by ALTA at both the Therapy level and the Associate/Teaching level.

The nine IMSLEC training centers in Texas are:

Scottish Rite Hospital, Southern Methodist University, Shelton School and LEAD, all in Dallas

Neuhaus Education Center, Houston

Scottish Rite Learning Center, Austin

Scottish Rite Learning Center of West Texas, Lubbock

Southwest Multisensory Training Center, Allen

James Phillips Williams Memorial Foundation, San Angelo

The Neuhaus Center is equipped to do remote training to bridge the gap in underserved areas. In addition to providing training at each of the Centers' location, many travel to other locations to provide training. SMU has a graduate degree program in multi-sensory structured language education and several other centers work with various universities to provide credit for course. (Shelton works with Dallas Baptist University, Scottish Rite Dallas & Austin and Southwest Multisensory in Allen work with Midwestern University. The Neuhaus Center has worked with St. Thomas University and Stephen F. Austin University and is currently beginning a program with SMU). With those exceptions there are no requirements or offerings related to this disorder at Texas' institutions of higher education for those entering the field of teaching of which I am aware.

*LEAD -
Texas Women's
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Another issue that our association faces each day is the lack of regulation in this industry. This past legislative session a voluntary licensing bill was enacted by the Texas legislature that will help with that issue. It allows those meeting a high level of training to apply for a license. This will greatly help parents, teachers and other professionals to distinguish those who just took a seminar in dyslexia then hung out a shingle, from those who have invested many hours of training and being critiqued and evaluated while demonstrating various teaching strategies and techniques Upon successful completion of training, they then take a national exam, and continue to take CEUs in the field. This consumer protection is critical to our field and those being served. Parents who waste hard-earned dollars on unqualified therapists do great disservice to a child with dyslexia. Time is important. Every day that passes

without intervention is a day that child is missing information in the classroom. The inability to read affects every academic subject in the school day.

You may be aware that our licensing program has already cleared many hurdles at the Department of State Health Services. An Advisory Committee has been appointed and has met twice to develop rules for the program to ensure that licenses could be issued this summer. ALTA has communicated information about this licensure to teachers and therapists across the state, many of whom have returned to finish up hours to qualify for the licensure. The training centers have also been involved educating and encouraging potential therapists to seek the licensure. Our members are eagerly awaiting information from the state to purchase licenses as soon as they are available.

In the meantime, we are constantly amazed by the talented children and adults we work with every day. They are quite brilliant and fortunately have many well-known role models to look to who have learned to compensate for their disorder and subsequently have made significant contributions to our society. Dyslexics are often gifted in many areas that do not require strong written language skills—such as art, computer science, design, drama, electronics, math, mechanics, sports, music, physics, sales, and business. It is encouraging to them to learn that people such as Walt Disney, Charles Schwab, Robin Williams and writer Stephen J. Cannell struggled with learning to read and write. Just recently, Dr. Carol W. Greider, a molecular biologist with the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore (and dyslexic), was declared a winner of the Nobel Prize in Science. She is one of only eight women to ever win the prize in physiology or medicine.

The ability to read should be the one most basic skill that children in our schools master, no matter their learning differences. I applaud you for taking the time to be here today to explore how we can best ensure that ALL Texas children have the appropriate instruction to be successful readers.