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SUSAN A. GIEGER
129 Whisperwood Drive
Dingmans Ferry, PA 18328
(570) 828-8845

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PA. STATE BOARD
OF EDUCATION

July 23, 2007

Mr. James Buckheit, Executive Director
State Board of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Buckheit:

It has come to my attention that there is to be legislative changes regarding children with specific learning disabilities. I would like to share our very frustrating and painful story with those in power who have the ability and opportunity to make a difference in the lives of these children.

I am the mother of four children — two of whom have specific learning disabilities. Their intellect is not impaired; however, their ability to learn is greatly affected.

My oldest son, turning 19 this August, graduated from high school in 2006. He started school at a young age because his birthday fell before the cut off. I first noticed something was different when I would go into his kindergarten class and although he was as articulate as the other students, he was not reading or writing at the same level as his peers. I questioned the staff and was told it was his age and he was fine. The first week of first grade we received a letter stating that he was behind and was being enrolled in the Title I reading program. He always excelled in math and science but struggled with reading and writing. This continued through sixth grade when even his math and science grades began to drop. He was placed in the low average classes where he remained throughout his school career. He always scored well on standardized tests, falling within the proficient level. His teachers always said things like, "We know he knows the material, He's just a poor test taker. He needs more confidence." The summer between tenth and eleventh grade we had him tested by an auditory specialist as well as had a visual perception screening done. Based on these results, the school tested him, and gave him an IEP with a specific learning disability in written expression and spelling. They also diagnosed him with a significant auditory processing problem. He was put into "concepts" classes but because he passed the language arts classes he was unable to be remediated thereby graduating from high school without the ability to read or write at an adult level (although he did receive a gold card for the grades he received on the state assessment tests). He has since failed out of college, unable to pass the reading and writing entrance classes twice. He finally switched to automotive courses, where he is excelling.

My youngest son is 12 and going into seventh grade this year. His birthday, being in December, does not put him in the young category for his grade. When very similar and yet different symptoms started popping up in school I began to question his teachers. He also excelled in math and science; but, he too, struggles with reading, writing and spelling (not spelling tests). Many times he would write letters backwards, even to this day, and sometimes when reading aloud, he will say the "d" sound for a word beginning with a "b" and vice versa. During third grade I expressed my concerns to the school and was again told that unless he was in academic jeopardy they were not going to test him.

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Mr. James Buckheit

July 23, 2007

Page Two

His ability to communicate verbally was far superior to how he was able to write and read. He was tested outside the district by an audiologist and also a visual perception screening was done. The results basically came back with a diagnosis of significant dyslexia. However, his IQ was in the above-average range. The results were brought to the school's attention where, subsequently they tested him also. He was given a Chapter 15 Agreement, (same as a 504 plan) not an IEP because his school grades were well above average. The school's testing showed, if an analysis were to be made on the most recent test results alone and not my son's standardized tests or his report card, he would qualify for an IEP — the discrepancy between the IQ and test scores were significant. However, when taking all three into account, the Chapter 15 was all that could be instituted; and meant there would be no remediation based on the dyslexia diagnosis. I was assured that once he failed and eventually he would; we could get the ball rolling.

Well we're now entering seventh grade with no results. As a matter of fact, I know both his fourth and fifth grade teachers (whose classes he was in all day) were very concerned. He was able to get great grades because he was very smart. At this level, all material is read aloud. The teacher reads all the text book material out loud, the language arts book stories are on tape and the students also read them aloud in class. That means by the time a test is given the material is heard at least 3 times. On standardized tests, the text is brief and never taken away. One can easily data process the material without understanding any of it. Yet this same child could not pick out a book from the library shelf and read it; not to mention writing and spelling — his work resembled that of a first grader when he entered sixth grade. The fourth grade teacher once gave him similar yet unfamiliar material and tested him on it. He initially failed but when she read the material to him and tested him again, he got an A. The fifth grade teacher's first comment during our first meeting was something to the effect of, "He is SOOOOO dyslexic." She would have to call him to her desk when questions were answered in paragraph form because she couldn't understand a word he wrote, but when he verbally gave the answers they were detailed and correct. He gained the reading points that were required by reading four times as many books as the other kids because he picked out books on a first grade level to pass the computer tests.

I am beyond the point of being frustrated and am completely disappointed. The last meeting at the end of the school year was so hostile. The guidance counselor is rude and belligerent — he has legislation on his side. Unless my child fails at the lowest level regardless of his IQ, there is no help for him. The guidance counselor says things like: "Most text only is printed on a sixth grade level so I shouldn't be so concerned." Or "It doesn't matter if he can't phonetically sound out words because they didn't have phonics years ago and those people can read." He even called my son into his office and asked him, "If we could give you more help, would you want it?" My son said no so he said that was something I should take into consideration. I told him. "My older son didn't want to wear glasses when he needed them but we made him because it was necessary and it is necessary for this child to be able to read."

Mr. James Buckheit

July 23, 2007

Page Three

Next year when he enters seventh grade he will no longer be in inclusion classes and will be required to take foreign language. I can only hope he fails. How sad is that! It's the only way the school will address his needs and he can hopefully, someday, go onto higher education with the ability to be anything and do anything he wants to do. As it stands right now, if he doesn't get the help he needs for his specific learning disability, he will have to go to vocational school. There's nothing wrong with that if that's what he wants; it's only wrong if that's his only option.

When children have a high IQ or above average IQ these specific learning disabilities can go undiagnosed for years. As far as reading goes, they are walked through the first 6 years and hear it all verbally. The writing is reviewed and corrected before finally being graded. The standardized tests are a joke. If I typed up a "Suessical" passage with questions, anyone with a reasonably average IQ could data process the material without understanding a word. Lowering expectations by putting them into lower classes is not the answer. Eventually these children will be adults. They will need to become productive members of society.

I have seen first hand a child with an above-average IQ graduate from high school and not be able to even read the back of a cereal box, literally! He could never be productive in an office setting, writing is impossible — he can't even string three sentences together. I'm about to see it again with my fourth child. He picked a book from the school book fair months ago, tried to read the first few pages and put it down never to pick it up again because he had to ask me at least 15 times what the words were. By the way, he is an honor roll student. Apparently, being an independent reader isn't very important.

Tell me, where do these kids fit in, where do they go to learn? Not in public schools where the cracks are so big we can hide an entire generation of "could have beens." Let these kids reach their goals, let them succeed, let them become who they are meant to be, and not what they have to settle for.

Now is the time for change, let's keep up with technology. In my children's case that alone could have meant the difference. Now, for one of them it's too late and for the other, time is quickly running out. How many more will it take?

Mr. James Buckheit

July 23, 2007

Page Four

Please remember that even for those who belong in regular education, as my kids do, there is still a great need for specialized instruction along with assistive technology that would make the difference for a brighter future. The key is recognizing the specific issues that affect these individuals and allowing them to perform to their ability in the regular education setting thereby offering them the same benefits as their peers.

I honestly feel that if we don't diagnose the specific disability and try to lump them all together, they will not get the individualized services they need. We don't treat the blind the same as the deaf, the same as the physically handicapped. It is the same with different learning disabilities. They are unique with unique ways to treat. Let's be as sensitive to their unseen disabilities as we would be to those whose disabilities are visible.

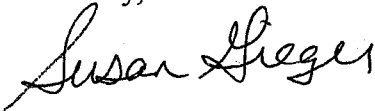
I have not even touched on the emotional toll this has taken on these two boys. They have always been frustrated and at times become extremely angry. Dealing day-to-day, year-to-year when they are well aware they are capable of more. My youngest calls himself "retarded" when talking about his reading problems. To me nothing puts it into perspective more than that.

There is a saying, something like: "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime." Let's teach these kids for a lifetime, not for a standardized test or to pass them through a district so the numbers look good. Let's actually give them the skills they need to get them through their lifetime.

If you have actually read this whole letter, thank you! It's lengthy and at times emotional. Let me just say there is not enough time or enough words and emotions to convey my thoughts on this subject.

Once again, thank you for your time. Please find it in your minds and hearts to give these kids their time.

Sincerely,



Susan Gieger