

The Honorable Julia Brownley
Testimony before the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee
Hearing on “The Science of Dyslexia”
September 18, 2014

Good morning.

I want to begin by thanking Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Johnson for their leadership, and for inviting me to testify about dyslexia.

I also want to thank the witnesses who have come here to discuss their research and experiences with dyslexia.

When my daughter Hannah struggled to learn to read, like any parent I was completely panicked about what to do next. It was Hannah’s dyslexia, and learning to navigate the school system, where I witnessed the good, the bad, and the ugly, that led me to public service: first as a school board member, then in the State Legislature, and now in Congress. This spring, Hannah received her Master’s degree in International Studies, and is now overseas saving the world with a NGO in Kenya, Africa. She speaks three languages, and she still misspells in all of them. I could not be prouder of her. But for every success story like Hannah, there are countless others who do not succeed.

Learning disabilities, like dyslexia, and attention-related disorders affect as many as 1 in 5 children in the United States. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, nearly half of secondary students with learning disabilities like dyslexia perform more than three grade levels below their enrolled grade in essential academic skills (45% in reading, 44% in math). 20% of students with a learning disability drop out of high school, compared to just 8% of students in the general population. That’s millions of American children who aren’t reaching their full potential.

However, advancements in cognitive science are teaching much more about how the brain develops, and how children learn. My hope is that today’s hearing will inform lawmakers about how to better translate groundbreaking research to innovative education policy that will make a difference in the lives of millions of Americans with dyslexia.

Our education system needs to do a better job training teachers to recognize and effectively educate students with dyslexia. We need to provide our schools with the resources to incorporate assistive technologies, such as audiobooks and speech to text interfaces, in the classroom, as well as support services to ensure every child has an equal opportunity to succeed.

The federal government also needs to meet its financial obligations to our schools.

For decades, Congress has failed to meet its 40% financial commitment for special education costs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, placing a heavier burden on states and local schools.

Congress also needs to increase its investment in scientific research on dyslexia, and other areas.

I'm sure many of my colleagues have heard from frustrated parents in their districts who are very concerned about their children with dyslexia: will they be allowed to take advanced courses, or pursue a passion like music or science? Will they get reasonable accommodations on state tests and college entrance exams? What will happen when their child graduates high school and makes the transition to college, where resources for students with learning disabilities can even more difficult to find than in elementary and secondary schools? Too often, misconceptions about dyslexia or learning disabilities result in a focus on a disability rather than an individual child's ability,

One of our Committee's most important missions is creating a 21st century workforce of engineers, scientists, and STEM professionals. To accomplish that goal, we need to make sure every student has the support they need from their educators, parents, and the community, to succeed.

Students with dyslexia are smart and capable and perhaps uniquely qualified because of their out-of-the-box way of attacking problems and processing information, but misconceptions about dyslexia too often result in a focus on a disability rather than ability. Today's panelists will demonstrate that this community has extraordinary strengths, and that ignoring dyslexics costs us all.

If you think that more should be done to address dyslexia, I highly encourage you to cosponsor the Congressional Dyslexia Caucus' bipartisan resolution, H.Res. 456. We already have 107 cosponsors, and we would welcome your support.