

# A Conversation with Helen and Harry Roussel

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May 24, 2017



Helen Roussel, left, and her son Harry, a sixth-grader at Pierson Middle School. Christine Sampson photo

## By Christine Sampson

Helen Roussel of Sag Harbor has spent several years active with the group Decoding Dyslexia New York, encouraging schools to train teachers in special methods and advocating with lawmakers to rewrite the state's legal definition of students with disabilities to also include dyslexia. Specifically, she has lobbied for schools to train teachers in a multisensory approach to reading called Orton-Gillingham, which helped her son Harry, now a sixth-grader at Pierson Middle School, catch up quickly when he was reading several

grade-levels below proficiency due to dyslexia. Harry has twice met with New York State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., who sponsored a bill that would help these students by mandating that dyslexia be described and addressed on their individualized education plans (IEP).

**Do you feel progress has been made in helping students with dyslexia here in Sag Harbor?**

**Harry:** I think progress has definitely been made.

**Helen:** We heard that next year there are quite a lot of children that who are struggling with reading at the schools who will be able to receive Orton-Gillingham services and other structured literacy services, whereas a couple of years ago they didn't have those services.

**What about in the surrounding school districts?**

**Helen:** Some schools are training teachers and some schools are simply more political than they are educational. They don't prioritize reading enough. You have less access to so many things and you're disenfranchised if you can't read. They call illiteracy the pipeline from school to prison.

**Are there any common misconceptions about dyslexia?**

**Helen:** I've heard educators say children will grow out of it. A lot of times I've even heard teachers tell parents that medication would help their child, who in all probability has dyslexia and medication will not help at all. It might quiet them down and stop them from exhibiting symptoms such as irritability, not wanting to go to school, and lack of focus – who wants to focus on reading when you can't decode what you're looking at?

**Harry, I understand one of your comments to Mr. Thiele concerned being 'lucky enough' to learn how to read. Can you recap your comments?**

**Harry:** I said I think it should never depend on luck whether or not a child learns how to read. All children should know how to read. You shouldn't have to be lucky to have a parent that advocates for you, like my mom, or be lucky to be in a school that is able to go and have teachers get trained.

**Helen, how do you feel seeing Harry thrive as a reader and now advocate on behalf of other students in his shoes?**

**Helen:** I'm definitely proud. It was the emotional piece that was actually the most important, because when he really wasn't making any progress, he was sad, had low confidence and lacked self-esteem ... Once they got a trained teacher and he was taught phonemic awareness, that opened up a whole other world for him. I'm just so relieved, so glad, but in another way it was tragic because I couldn't believe how hard it was to get a teacher trained.

**How important is the legislation making its way through Albany right now?**

**Helen:** It's wonderful. Right now, dyslexia is [categorized] with head injuries. It's completely misleading and not defined accurately.

**Harry:** We need small steps until we're able to make the legislation better and add some budget to it, because that's what all the other states did.

**Helen:** Twenty-seven states have this in their laws. New York is way behind.

**In your opinion, how important is it to advocate for issues that you care about, like support for dyslexic children?**

**Harry:** I think it's very important. I really feel terrible how a lot of kids aren't learning how to read. They feel there is something wrong with them, and a lot of them are struggling inside.

**Helen:** Advocacy is the agent of change. Local action has the potential to reverberate and cause national policy shifts. We want that! Literacy would make a huge difference in the quality of life for so many people.

*Ms. Roussel has started an online petition to support Mr. Thiele's bill. The petition can be found at [petitions.moveon.org/sign/define-dyslexia-in-education](https://petitions.moveon.org/sign/define-dyslexia-in-education). The Peconic Teacher Center in Southampton is offering teacher training this summer in the Orton-Gillingham method to help dyslexic children and challenged readers improve their skills. More information can be found at [peconicteachercenter.org](https://peconicteachercenter.org).*

## Comments