

New York State Law Recognizes Dyslexia on School IEPs

□ by Christine Sampson, sagharborexpress.com

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Helen Roussel, left, and her son Harry, right, were happy to hear the news that New York State has passed legislation that acknowledges dyslexia on students' individualized education programs
Photo by: IEPs

By Christine Sampson

After much lobbying by parents and teachers both locally and regionally, Governor Andrew Cuomo recently signed a new law that will allow schools to recognize dyslexia and other similar challenges on students' individualized educational programs (IEPs).

Previously, schools in New York State did not identify dyslexia and related learning challenges on IEPs. Instead, according to New York State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., who co-sponsored the legislation launched by Assemblywoman Jo Anne Simon of Brooklyn, schools believed they were not permitted to use those specific terms on IEPs.

“I see this legislation as educating school districts about dyslexia,” Mr. Thiele said. “For parents who are advocating for their children, it provides them with another tool to be able to get the services that their kids need. What do they say about any problem? The first step is recognizing it.”

Children with dyslexia have trouble reading, in that they have difficulty connecting letters to their sounds, and problems with reading comprehension often follow. Related problems include dysgraphia — indicating problems with writing — and dyscalculia, involving problems with numbers and math.

The bill takes effect immediately but requires the state to issue its guidelines sometime during the current school year. What this change likely means for students with these challenges is they will be identified as needing extra help sooner and they will get it more quickly.

Helen Roussel, a Sag Harbor parent who has lobbied for years for more support in schools for dyslexic children, called it “great news.”

“It is a gift for a struggling child to be able to understand that he or she is not ‘disabled,’ but actually has a learning difference that millions of other people have, and some of them went onto be the most powerful innovators of the 21st century in art and science,” she said. “It is an injustice for a child to struggle through school not knowing why or what can help. Knowledge is power. Finally, reading, writing and math issues can be approached from a science-based perspective. Using the correct terminology to define an issue is a powerful and critical first step.”

Ms. Roussel’s son Harry, a Pierson Middle School seventh-grader who has dyslexia, and who has lobbied in Albany for the changes, said he was happy to learn the news. Schools “will know what they have to do to help children learn,” he said. “It will mean that hundreds of thousands of children will know why they are struggling. In the future they will not just be told they are disabled in some way.”

Barbara Bekermus, director of pupil personnel services for the Sag Harbor School District, said she thinks recognizing these learning challenges on IEPs “will make our teachers better teachers, because schools will have to provide that type of instruction when children are in that kind of classification. By identifying these students, it’s helping us understand what best practices are to help them.”

Janine Mahoney, a Shelter Island teacher who also lobbied for the legislation, was also thrilled to hear the news.

“By encouraging schools to say dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia, we are encouraging the early identification of students so that they may be taught as their brains learn best,” she said. “These methodologies are research based and are best practice, quite honestly, for all learners.”

Ms. Roussel said there is “still a long way to go.”

“Many school districts still do not have trained teachers, and implementing approaches and programs into state schools has to be 100 percent,” she said.

Comments