

Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee
“Developmental Perspective on Testing for Dyslexia”
October 13, 2015, 10:00AM
New Orleans, LA

Testimony of Mr. Ameer Baraka
Author/Actor
New Orleans, LA

I would first like to thank the committee for allowing me the opportunity to tell my story. I also would like to thank Senator Bill Cassidy and his wife for the work they do to help those who struggle with dyslexia.

As a young kid living in abject poverty, it was hard on my mother who was trying to raise three kids. My two siblings effortlessly excelled in school and there was joy around their accomplishments. But for some reason I wasn't able to understand what was being taught. My mother and my siblings couldn't understand why school didn't come as easily for me. So, I was called stupid, dumb and other names that pushed me into darkness and shyness. I became disengaged with school and believed that I just might really be dumb because I couldn't read. In third grade, I started cutting school and would sleep in the project hall ways on Fridays to avoid spelling tests. There was one teacher who tried to help me, but by this time it was too late. I created this distorted image of myself and nothing was going to alter it. I was incarcerated by my own self-imposed limitations. I couldn't read or spell and my family and peers made that very clear to me.

I'll never forget the day I was called upon to read out loud in my 6 grade class. Other kids had their hands up eager to read but the teacher must have saw me with my head down trying not to be noticed. It was the most embarrassing moment of my life. I didn't know a single word and I struggled to read the paragraph. As I look back now, I can't understand how teachers kept pushing me to the next grade. That day I made up in my mind that I was never going back to school.

Shortly after that incident in school, I was introduced to a drug dealer by another friend who also had given up on school. This was my solution because dealing drugs required no reading. So, I would pray at night for God to help me become a big time drug dealer so I could help my family and community. Making that choice seemed like my best and only option. I did really well and felt good about myself in the drug world. No one called me dumb or stupid and we all basically shared the same mind set about hating school. I made a few attempts to get back in school to alleviate my mother's concerns about my future, but it was not successful. I would just show up for a couple hours and leave to get back to dealing my drugs.

I bought into the lies of the streets, that real men get money by any means necessary and to protect their block even if it came down to using a gun. I took another kid's life because he was dealing in my projects and that was a no no if you weren't from my projects. After serving a year for manslaughter as a juvenile, I was released. I still couldn't read so I got right back into that

lifestyle of dealing drugs. As time went on, I was getting deeper into this life and was eventually caught with a lot of drugs and was facing 60 years in prison. With God's help I was found guilty of a lesser crime and given 4 years instead.

That's when my metamorphosis took place. I wanted to learn to read. My GED teacher in prison realized that I was reading poorly and had me tested for a learning disability. Dyslexia was a word I had never heard of until I was in prison. He said, if I try hard enough I could get my GED. Every day after I came out of working in the fields, I would go to school and at night stay up learning to spell words. It was hard work trying to believe that learning to read and getting my GED was possible. But my teacher helped me get through it and after 4 years I attained my GED.

If someone detected this problem earlier in my childhood education it would have saved me a lot of suffering and possibly my time in jail. My self-esteem shot through the roof after I received my GED. There are so many kids today that have this same issue with reading. They can't get adequate help because teachers can't devote their entire day or class time to one individual student who struggles with reading. Or they are never diagnosed, and never understand why they are having so many problems in school.

Also, I read my memoir book (The Life I Chose) to many of the men in prison and now they want to learn to read. We can't wait until people get into prison to help them realize their potential. I hope the committee will take prevention measures now. When a boy or girl can read anything becomes possible. To reduce incarceration, let's get ahead of this epidemic and turn lives around early. If it wasn't for that teacher in prison and God's mercy, I would be dead or in prison with no chance to return to society.

Reading set me free to dream of becoming an actor, producer and author. I appreciate you reading my testimony. And please share it with children and educators across the world.

Thank you for listening.

Best,
Ameer Baraka