

Testimony on HB 281 on Importance of People First Language
To Ohio House Committee on Tuesday, May 25th

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Distinguished Members of the Ohio House of Representatives. I appreciate the opportunity of testify on using People First language in any legislation or reference to people with disabilities. This is an a very important concept the embraces the dignity and equality of those individuals that have a disability, which can be all of us. I would like to delineate the logic that undergirds this assertion in simple terms.

The logic of people first language dictates that we are all people and if there is any kind of disability, we should first recognize the dignity of the person first and if need be, recognize the disability if such a recognition adds clarity or understanding. Our choice of language is not trivial and our words can indicate equality or they can indicate that a person is not equal because of some perceived flaw. Rather than saying the disabled, we would say a person with a disability. Rather than saying intellectually disabled, we would say, a person with an intellectual disability. Rather than saying nondisabled, we would say, person without a disability.

In fact, when you look at society whom among us does not have a challenge or yes, a disability, that inhibits our abilities without some kind of assistance. This is particularly true as we grow older. Many of us here today depend on a pair of glasses to help us read and aren't stairs getting harder to climb? If my electricity goes out, or my plumbing stops up, I do not have the ability to fix it on my own without (in my case) the attempt of fixing it threatens my life. Absolutely not! I need assistance, but I don't want to be referred to as the unlit person, or the stopped-up person. Rather, I am a person with an electrical disability or a plumbing disability. I know this sounds ridiculous to hear it this way. This is because as a society we have made such assistance normal and expected. Needing assistance is part of being a person and how everyone sees, understands and interfaces with the world. By referring to an individual as a Learning-Disabled Person or a Handicapped Person such language puts disability first and dismisses these individuals as people, who like all of us, need assistance. Using language that places the disability first places emphasis on the disability and suggests they are less than – when in fact, an empathetic stance recognizes that all of us need assistance in some way or another.

We must not focus on someone's challenge or disability. Rather, we can focus on their abilities as we consider how we can, as a community, create greater and yes, universal access. We need to think about how we design our environments, our homes, our classrooms, our shopping malls and stores, our businesses. All this starts with words and language, and people first language is critical to achieving greater equality for all. The cognitive scientist, Donald Norman, in his book [The design of everyday things](#), says that anything that creates unnecessary problems needs to be rethought. Norman studied human error, like the one at *Three Mile Island*, he found that the disaster was far less about human error than a problem with the way the nuclear power plant control panel was designed.

We all have challenges that can be called a disability. We must place people first and not get caught up with the challenge that creates a disability because they can be situational and with the right supports the disability is irrelevant or nonexistent. How things are designed has consequences and can accentuate or ameliorate a person's challenge or disability. Some doors have to be pushed, others

pulled, still others slid. There was a time when a water faucet had cold on the left and hot on the right, or is it the other way around? Norman says when we make a mistake, we inadvertently blame ourselves. But Norman's first rule states, "It's not your fault." The second rule is to pay attention to the principles of design.

Finally, I want to thank the committee for this opportunity to express a desire to put the person first in our language as expressed in our laws and regulations. The way a society refers to its members who have disabilities shapes its beliefs and ideas about them. Using person first terms can foster positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Person first language emphasizes the person, not the disability. To avoid old language habits a few adjustments can show respect for individual differences ("Person First," 1992). Describe differences accurately and in ways that convey respect. Here are three guidelines (a) Put the person first in word and thought (b) Tell the truth without adding judgment, and (c) Don't include a person's differences if they are not relevant to the information.

Respectfully, Dr. Steve Kroeger, Associate Professor of Special Education