

## Special Education Interim Legislative Committee, University Center, 07/11/19

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Thank you for the invitation, Representative Rasmussen & to the rest of the committee tasked with answering important questions regarding special education categories and funding.

INTRO – I live in Wagner, SD and have 14 yrs experience as a school psychologist in rural districts. I help determine eligibility for 14 disability categories and provide consultation across 5 sites. In my career, 2 dyslexia bills have come and gone through Pierre. I opposed both. I believed we were identifying and serving students with dyslexia. However my eyes have been opened to a number of issues children and families with dyslexia face, especially in rural districts.

IDENTIFYING students with dyslexia starts with GENERAL EDUCATION - We cannot have a conversation about dyslexia without talking about GenEd. If you want to save SpEd money, **prevent** dyslexic learners from needing it\*. **3 step Plan:**

1. **Cohesive K-3 curriculum** using systematic, multi-sensory, and direct instruction. What works for dyslexic students, will work for all students. Do not allow “islands” and K-3 teachers to use different curriculums.
2. **Progress Monitor**. In most cases, a designated dyslexia screener is not necessary. Most districts use DIBELS, AIMSweb, NWEA...*something*. Do not screen every child every week. *Train* teachers how to use the data system.
3. **USE the DATA to design TARGETED INTERVENTIONS**. You must set aside time and have adequate resources.

\*Some students with mild dyslexia may never need Special Education if given proper core instruction and targeted interventions.

If difficulties continue after interventions – EVALUATE to better understand the constellation of skills/needs

- Depending on results, a 504 Plan or IEP might be the outcome. SOME WILL NOT MEET SpEd CRITERIA. This is why what is going on in GenEd matters - if students do not qualify for SpEd, GenEd/Title is all they have.
- Why they don't qualify: they possess many compensatory strategies, have average or above IQs, are very observant, and typically have visual strengths and high average listening comprehension to learn or get by.
- When testing, we must scrutinize the reading subtests and look for the common patterns. Composite scores do not always convey the nuances. Many subtests have good reliability coefficients. *Ps, I am not an expert, but I'm learning.*

Roadblocks in Rural SD

- A district will establish a great team or have a strong leader, they get a good system in place, but then the leader leaves. In rural districts where 1-2 people “run” the data/intervention system, it can fall apart with changeovers.
- Rural Title teachers often fill *multiple* roles, have limited training on reading instruction/intervention and often none on dyslexia. Though they are in great positions to run rural data/intervention systems, they don't receive adequate training and are too busy with other roles. Not all school psychologists are confident in their ability to identify dyslexia. Many of us do not administer the academic tests. Education majors leave graduate school with degrees in Reading Specialist or Curriculum and Instruction that barely mention dyslexia.
- Districts say, “We don't test for dyslexia” in response to parent concerns and create an “us against them” dynamic. We have been testing for dyslexia as long as special education has existed – it is a severe reading disability.
- South Dakota loves local control....but what about districts that need more direction and support?

DYSLEXIA matters

- 3 shy, quiet 1<sup>st</sup> grade boys that I tested in recent years come to mind. When I think of them, I see sadness, hopeless, and fear. We cannot have children afraid of being called on to read and weekly spelling tests or feeling inferior because their brains are wired differently.
- **Reading is a code and it is our responsibility to help children understand it and give them resources to access content quicker.**
- Reading/literacy is a birthday card from Grandma, lunch menus, classmates' birthdays on the calendar, knock-knock jokes, invitations to Bday parties, a funny graphic t-shirt, job applications, an escape into the world of Harry Potter, Hunger Games, Shel Silverstein, and Green Eggs and Ham.