

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1231

Crysta Schenck, Northern Cass Elementary Principal

Chairman Heinert, Vice Chair Schreiber-Beck, and members of the committee, my name is Crysta Schenck, I'm the Elementary Principal for Northern Cass Elementary School. I have been in this position since 2010. I also serve as an administrator serving on the Southeast Consortium Dyslexia Pilot program. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify in support of a dyslexia focus in our North Dakota schools.

During my career, I have taught various elementary grade levels and even served as a Title I educator. I have had the opportunity to impact over 1,000 learners during my 24 years in education. Child Mind Institute states that as many as 1 in 5 learners have dyslexia. Prior to 2018, I had little understanding of dyslexia or the science of reading. My experience or lack thereof is not drastically different from that of other educators in our state. We know more now than ever about dyslexia and with that knowledge comes the responsibility to do more.

Back in 2018, a trend was noticed that our learners at Northern Cass were not showing gains in reading on our benchmark or state assessments. Rachel Richtsmeier, our performance strategist, and I started digging deeper into curriculums and research of what we were missing. We discovered the Science of Reading. In the meantime, the state offered a grant for a dyslexia screening pilot program. We decided along with Kindred, Lisbon, and Enderlin to apply (later adding the Richland school district in 2021 to the continuation of the pilot program). Our districts were chosen to pilot and started researching. We put our focus on being able to identify dyslexia learners early through screening and gain as much knowledge as possible in order to best serve all learners' unique needs. Our dyslexia report submitted to you shows the growth each of our districts have made over the four year period with the implementation of Science of Reading and Research Based Interventions. The

report includes impact statements from both educators, parents, and administrators. I encourage you to take the time to read and reflect on our impacts. One area I'd like to highlight for this committee is 'Data by District' (see Appendix A, School District B) which shows when LETRS training was initially offered in the district in rounds with the first group starting fall of 2020. I need you to understand, not all educators at every level started training at that time, due to substitute shortages, cost, staff turnover, and time commitments. We won't have all our Northern Cass staff fully trained until spring of 2024. However, the data does show the overall trend lines going up from the start of the pilot to present. professional learning and aligned curriculum to learner growth.

To understand the data I shared, let me put it in the context of a learner. I want to share about a young child who I watched go through the system struggling in reading. This learner was a vivacious and curious child prior to entering school. The child loved to explore, be active, and socialize. However, when school started, the parents and educators started to notice a change in the learner's personality. The child struggled in Kindergarten and first grade with reading and spelling. Intervention was provided, but little to no gains made. The district, at the time, did not have additional support in place to screen for dyslexia or to provide research based interventions to support specific learning needs in decoding. The learner received generic interventions and continued to struggle in upper elementary. He socialized less with his peers and became a discipline problem. His mom took him to a reading specialist in upper elementary and he was identified as dyslexic. He was reading at a first grade level. For years, the learner simply believed he was dumb. Things the learner loved such as sports became impossible to participate in due to after school intensive reading interventions with a reading tutor. That learner does not need a name, because it is too often a real experience for students across the state.

Students need a team of people committed to their success. The state took an initial step with HB 1388 adding requirements to Century Code that all Kindergarten through grade 3 educators receive

training in instructional practices aligned with research that reveals the science of how the brain learns and engages in reading. The bill also required districts to use scientifically-based instructional materials and approaches. This ensures all learners are provided an educator who understands the Science of Reading and how the brain learns to read. The next step for our state is to ensure our districts understand dyslexia, characteristics of dyslexia, and the scientifically-based interventions to support learners who need it. I support the concept of this bill but do believe there needs to be adjustment.

1. Districts must have access to a benchmark assessment/universal screener, where educators can identify specific strengths and weaknesses of learners.
2. Districts need access to training to develop a screening protocol or MTSS system to benefit all learners.
3. Districts need to have access to specific interventions that are research-based, which can aid in reading deficits of decoding, phonemic awareness, and spelling.
4. Districts need to have access to an educator in their district (or a neighboring district) who is trained on dyslexia and the characteristics of dyslexia.
 - a. This would need additional funding from the state or it would become an unfunded mandate and put additional responsibilities on schools they can not fund.
 - b. Provide annual professional development for all educators on how to identify characteristics of dyslexia and understand how a dyslexic brain works.

If we as a state want to promote that our learners are prepared to leave our North Dakota schools ready for college, career, or military, it starts in primary school. We must commit to the foundational pieces of education—like reading, by understanding the science of reading and the strategies to intervene effectively when a learner has a specific reading deficit. Dyslexia is only one aspect of a complex issue and if funded correctly, North Dakota could be the leader for our nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I stand for any questions.