

Re: HB 1231

Date: March 6, 2023

To: Chairman Elkin and members of the Senate Education Committee

My name is Sarah Robinson. I am a clinical associate professor at UND and the director of the Dyslexia and Language-based Reading Disorders certificate. I supervise the evaluation and service delivery of children with dyslexia. I also helped to collect and analyze the data in the Grand Forks Dyslexia Pilot program. My testimony today, however, reflects my own thoughts and experiences and I do not represent UND or Grand Forks Public Schools.

I write in support of HB 1231.

In 2005, the US Department of Education sent out a public notice directing public school to use the word dyslexia. They encouraged the schools to evaluate children for this specific reading disorder.

Unfortunately, the school districts in North Dakota did not follow this directive and continued to view dyslexia as a medical diagnosis. I am happy to say, in the past two years North Dakota has come a long way. Leaders in the ND Department of Education and several educators now understand dyslexia to be a neurobiological difference that impacts word-level decoding and spelling. But we still have work to do in order to ensure that children in North Dakota become proficient readers.

HB 1231 outlines the key components of what we need to do.

1. Mandatory screening at the beginning of 1st grade is CRITICAL!

We can reliably screen for dyslexia and language-based reading difficulties by age 7.

2. A detailed intervention plan for students that do not pass the screening, along with a method for assessing the intervention plan (including a timeline with clear objectives) is also important.

Research suggests that we can change the trajectory of a struggling reader by rewiring the brain through early, targeted intervention. For some students that targeted intervention (referred to as Tier 2 intervention) will not be enough. We need a clear criteria for determining when to refer a student for a full evaluation to be considered for special education.

I also suggest that ND DPI develop a task force to help guide school districts in appropriate screening materials and interventions. DPI has been instrumental and very successful in leading the Science of Reading movement. By taking the lead, school districts would benefit both financially (by not having to devote a school-level individual to figure this out) and instructionally (most educators are asking for guidance). Many districts already administer assessments that could be used for universal screening purposes; there should be minimal to no additional cost. Districts just need guidance in interpreting this data.

Educators do, however, need support in learning more about best practices in providing services for those with dyslexia. I am humbled and honored to teach educators that work all day with students and then pay out of their pockets, and invest their own time to learn how to better serve students with dyslexia. We are lucky to have them serving the students of North Dakota.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Robinson, PhD, CCC-SLP