

Chairman Elkin and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Aimee Volk, and I currently serve West Fargo Public Schools as a Curriculum Coordinator and high school Dean of Students. I am an educator with a Master's degree in reading and a Doctoral degree in teaching and learning. I am also a parent of two children diagnosed with dyslexia. I am here to provide information on House Bill 1306 regarding a dyslexia voucher program.

According to the International Dyslexia Association and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, there is not a universally accepted definition of dyslexia. However, experts agree that dyslexia is a specific neurobiological learning disability that makes it difficult to learn reading and writing skills. Interestingly, dyslexia is not a reading and writing disorder. It is a language-based disorder. Therefore, dyslexia impacts a learner's phonological and/or orthographic processing, which may lead to poor decoding, inaccurate and/or slow printed word recognition, and poor spelling abilities- all deficits that impact reading fluency, comprehension, and written expression.

Dyslexia can be difficult to identify because it occurs on a continuum, and it impacts each individual differently. In addition, dyslexia often coexists with other invisible disabilities, such as attention deficit disorder, sound speech disorder, specific language impairment, and dyspraxia.

A neuropsychologist diagnosed my son with dyslexia at the end of third grade; however, I had a strong inkling that he was dyslexic when he was in first grade. I chose not to have him formally tested for dyslexia because our schools already provided direct instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness, and they embed these skills throughout the school day within the context of other grade-level content standards. Each learner has specific learning needs, yet all learners still need to learn grade-level content alongside their peers.

Dyslexic learners do not need different reading or writing instruction, but they may need more time and more repetition to learn specific skills, just as any struggling reader might. Many dyslexic learners need support from qualified reading specialists, but since dyslexia is a language disability, multiple educational professionals, such as classroom teachers and speech pathologists, also play a critical role in each learner's learning journey.

Schools do not implement educational supports because of a specific diagnosis. Schools implement supports when a learner shows an educational need for a specific skill deficit. In other words, a diagnosis does not equal a specific learning need or regimented plan. Learning plans are created in response to each learner's strengths and struggles. Our schools are equipped to support learners showing various educational needs through a variety of Multi-tiered systems of support and specialist teachers.

I believe that our schools' amazing educators provided my son with what he needed every day. However, since he was a struggling reader, he did need more time to learn specific skills. Therefore, I used my educational training to tutor him at home. If I were not able to provide that tutoring, as many families are not, I would have considered the additional tutoring from a community agency in addition to the school day, but not during or in place of the school day.

When my youngest daughter began first grade, I again noticed multiple dyslexic tendencies, and I still chose not to have her tested until the end of third grade. I waited to have both my children tested for dyslexia at the end of third grade because this is when learners are able to begin advocating for themselves. The specific testing my children went through with their neuropsychologic helped them discover their strengths and struggles and understand how their brain worked as it learned and processed information. It also helped them understand that they will always have dyslexia, but they will be successful because of all of the work that they have done to learn the specific strategies, within a variety of contexts, from their teachers.

At this time, I oppose NB 1306. I am concerned about:

- The universal list of supports in this bill. Supports should not be universally applied for all learners with a specific diagnosis. Each dyslexic learner exhibits a different learning profile and their supports should be created to meet those individual needs.
- The bill does not specify who can diagnose dyslexia. Since dyslexia is a neurobiological disability, the clinical diagnosis should come from a clinical expert such as a neuropsychologist.
- Permitting private tutors to provide tutoring services on school premises during the school day would be detrimental to student learning. If a learner were to receive tutoring during the school day, they would miss out on opportunities that are not able to be replicated and, therefore, miss out on important learning experiences.

I do support the idea of vouchers available for interested families. However, these additional services must be offered outside of the school day.

Chairman Elkin and Members of the Committee that concludes my prepared testimony, and I would gladly respond to any questions at volk@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

Thank you for your consideration.