

Chairman Elkin and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Elizabeth Mackowick, and I am the Title I and Reading Coordinator in West Fargo Public Schools. I am grateful to work alongside reading teachers in West Fargo Public Schools and I am sharing a message supported by these professionals that work diligently with learners exhibiting dyslexic characteristics every day. I am here to provide information on House Bill 1306 regarding a dyslexia voucher program.

The word dyslexia is derived from the Greek “dys” (meaning poor or inadequate) and “lexis” (words or language). Dyslexia is a learning disability characterized by problems in expressive or receptive, oral or written language.

The [International Dyslexia Association](#) describes Dyslexia as

- a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin.
- characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.
- typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relations to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.
- secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

As a school district, we work alongside families to support all learners in our shared goal of literacy achievement. For that reason, we ensure that all learners in the general education setting receive instruction on the North Dakota English Language Arts (ELA) standards. In the elementary grades, there is high focus on the phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary for all learners in addition to written expression and spelling. Instruction is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and differentiated to ensure learners have the best opportunity to succeed. However, some learners still need additional supports.

All schools are required to have universal screening processes in place. We can speak to West Fargo Public Schools, among others, that screen these youngest learners three times a year to gather the information necessary to determine which learners need more instructional support than the general education setting can provide.

Schools have reading strategists in place to support those learners demonstrating an educational need. They utilize not only the above-mentioned universal screening, but also additional diagnostic literacy (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) assessments to determine learners needs and prescribe instruction to meet those needs. They utilize evidence-based practices and resources to support all learners that show a reading deficit, including learners presenting dyslexia characteristics.

When I say all learners, we are talking about our learners across the literacy spectrum, which includes learners exhibiting dyslexic characteristics. As you can see, we have a lot of tools in place to support learners and their families on their unique literacy journey.

The professionals I work with every day see these learners and communicate with their families on a regular basis. They are incredibly passionate about their work and supporting learner success, which is why they have taken the time and energy to become highly qualified reading strategists and invest their time and efforts into their learners.

I had many conversations with these teachers before preparing this testimony today. If there were specific changes to the bill, I feel we could support it, but in its current state, I do oppose. The following is where I find concerns.

- The list of supports in this bill should not be universally applied for all learners with the diagnosis. Each dyslexic learner exhibits a different profile of need. Professional teachers in our schools are equipped to support learners that are showing educational need through the various Multi-Tiered Systems of Support ([MTSS](#)), reading strategists interventions, in addition to the instruction they receive from their general education teacher. These supports are in place already, and are applied when necessary, as part of the school day to support learner growth.
- The bill is not specific about who is diagnosing dyslexia, and since it is a neurobiological disability, the clinical diagnosing responsibility is in a neuropsychologist.
 - Schools will continue to provide educational testing to verify the presence of a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) or dyslexia and can provide the needed diagnostic documentation required for specially designed instruction and accommodations. These services are already required and in place for learners as they show need.
- Permitting private tutors to provide tutoring services on school premises can be done well or it can become a complex hurdle to overcome. Schools are responsible to teach the learner in all content areas along with their peers, as well as offering access to rich opportunities and experiences throughout their academic day. If a child were to receive tutoring during the school day, they would miss out on opportunities that are not able to be replicated, and therefore, schools would not be able to meet their responsibilities in educating the learner.

I do support that vouchers available for interested families is a positive project to consider. When a team of educators, families, and the learner come together, with a positive, growth mindset to diagnostically identify areas of need, problem solve, plan great instruction, and assess progress, great things happen. At times, the families and learner choose to capitalize on additional time outside of a typical school day to access more instruction and practice, and I understand the need and the interest of the voucher to support those interests. It is critical, however, that if these outside agencies are supporting learners, that they are in addition to what each learner accesses at school and not in place of the learning happening at school.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, that concludes my prepared testimony, and I would gladly answer any questions. I can most easily be reached at emackowick@west-fargo.k12.nd.us

Thank you for your consideration.