

CHEYENNE—Kari Roden is a veteran teacher with a master’s degree in reading, so when her five-year-old daughter struggled with reading, she started looking for answers.

“She couldn’t learn to read, and I couldn’t figure out why,” Roden said. She was homeschooling her at the time because her daughter was dealing with epilepsy and some other health issues.

At first she thought her daughter’s epilepsy medication may be to blame, but even after taking her off the medication she still couldn’t learn to read. Her daughter’s neurologist thought she must have Attention Deficit Disorder, so she and her husband reluctantly put her on medication for that. There was still no improvement.

“We took her off everything, and I still had no idea what was going on,” Roden said. She started doing some research and discovered her daughter might be dyslexic. They had a private evaluation done at Children’s Hospital Colorado and received an official dyslexia diagnosis. Roden explained that dyslexia isn’t seeing words or letters backwards, but rather is a language processing disorder.

She realized if she, a veteran teacher with a master’s degree in teaching children how to read, didn’t know what the signs of dyslexia were, many other teachers wouldn’t know either.

She knew something had to be done.

But Roden wasn’t the only mother in Cheyenne fighting to help her child learn to read.

Heather Fleming has a similar story of struggle and looking for answers.

“My son really struggled with school—particularly reading, writing and spelling—starting in kindergarten,” she said. Fleming tried to get answers from his teachers about what could be wrong, but they assured her he was just a late bloomer. She said she and her husband watched their son struggle—not only academically, but also emotionally—and it was heart-breaking. By the time he was in third grade they had had enough, so they went looking for concrete answers.

“We decided to take matters into our own hands and pay to have him privately evaluated,” Fleming said. That’s when he was diagnosed with dyslexia. At that point the

Flemings enrolled their son in a private school in Evergreen, Colo. called Vertical Skills Academy that is specifically for bright dyslexic children.

She and her son moved to Denver, coming home to Cheyenne on the weekends. Fleming said not only was this very expensive, it was very disruptive to their family life.

“To say it was emotionally devastating would not be an overstatement,” she said.

While her son was attending the private school, Fleming was also getting an education.

“During that time I began the deep dive into the science of reading—how reading skills are acquired and what gets in the way,” Fleming said. She did extensive training in how to teach reading and ended up tutoring at both the school and Rocky Mountain Camp for Dyslexics.

Fleming said her son attended fourth and fifth grade in Evergreen where he succeeded at reading and caught up academically, so they returned to Cheyenne.

Like Roden, once she was back in Cheyenne, she knew someone had to look for ways to help the state’s dyslexic children.

The pair met about a year and a half ago, and in that time, they have founded WY Lit, an organization whose goal is empowering parents and educators to help children with dyslexia using evidence-based reading instruction.

“Our core mission is to provide funding to districts, schools and individual teachers to do training and purchase curricula that provide explicit, systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and writing,” Fleming said in an email. “We will also empower parents with information about literacy and advocacy.”

To do this, they are hoping to work with donors to raise money for teacher training in the science of evidence-based reading instruction.

They have also continued educating themselves and tutoring others in the time they have worked together. Fleming is enrolled in a master’s degree program in reading science through Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, and Roden is a half-time intensive reading interventionist specializing in dyslexia who works in two Cheyenne schools.

Though their fundraising work is just getting off the ground, they have already been working with the Wyoming Department of Education and the Wyoming Legislature’s House and Senate Education Committees to amend the state’s previous dyslexia screening law, formerly Senate File 52.

An amended bill, House Bill 297 passed in the last legislative session. Fleming said this bill improved the existing legislation for screening and intervention around dyslexia and other reading difficulties.

“The bill also requires that evidence-based core curricula and interventions be used, and that teachers are trained in these programs,” Fleming wrote in the email.

Now WY Lit is reaching out to school districts across the state to support them in meeting the requirements of the bill. They are offering free professional development for school districts where they teach dyslexia awareness to educators. They also share some statistics they have learned about dyslexia—including that an estimated 20 percent of the population is impacted by dyslexia and that children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

Part of their work empowering parents and teachers is getting the word out about signs of dyslexia. Their website, wylit.org, has resources for both teachers and parents, including an upcoming dyslexia simulator that will help people understand what it feels like to read with dyslexia. The website also offers a list of signs of dyslexia by age.

Fleming said some common signs include having below-benchmark testing scores and having sloppy, outsized hand writing. Another big clue is a discrepancy between listening comprehension and reading comprehension—in other words, if a child can understand a story that is read to them but can’t understand the same story if they try to read it themselves. Roden noted another key is that dyslexia is genetic. If a child has a family member who is dyslexic, there is a chance they are dyslexic as well.

Fleming and Roden are currently seeking to identify members for a board of directors for WY Lit. They said people who are as passionate as they are about helping students with reading difficulties should reach out to them via their website.

“We just want to help all kids have the chance to learn to read—because they can,” Roden said.

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