

Wyoming Can Do Better for Students with Dyslexia

Editor's note: WY Lit believes that it is important for you to hear from parents of struggling readers. Dondi Tondro-Smith from Jackson, Wyoming is one such parent. Her story is that of so many of our bright, struggling students with dyslexia in Wyoming.

Being backed into an educational corner is a nightmare for parents of children with common learning disabilities like dyslexia. Our daughter is what is referred to as twice exceptional, or 2E. She is dyslexic and has a high IQ.

We moved back to Jackson, Wyoming in 2018. We were excited that she would be able to walk to the elementary school just down the road. Little did we know that our advocacy efforts would be met with hostility and a district culture that discourages parents from pursuing reading intervention services and a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for children with disabilities. Our school demonstrated ignorance about dyslexia and wasted precious time providing evidence-based reading instruction and complete intervention.

After two years of advocating into ignorance and apathy and watching our daughter's self-confidence dwindle, we decided to homeschool. This protection of her well-being and education comes with a steep price tag—financially and emotionally. There are many days when our nine-year-old and I end up in tearful heap. Being both parent and teacher to a struggling reader is agonizing and exhausting. We should not be responsible for providing an individualized education for this most common and well-understood of learning disabilities.

My husband is profoundly dyslexic. His traumatic childhood educational experiences (ACE's) guided our concerns. We did not believe that a generation later we would be responsible for

teaching the teachers how to teach our daughter. We were naïve. Reading research has come so far, but there remains an enormous gap between reading research, teacher preparation, programs and professional development.

Parents of struggling readers assume that teachers and administrators have been trained to recognize the signs of dyslexia and provide appropriate support(s). Just as we expect doctors to practice medicine that is informed by current, relevant, scientifically sound research, we expect teachers to have been empowered with valid, reliable teaching practices and curricula.

Dyslexia can be identified with 90% certainty as early as age 5 and is estimated to impact up to 20% of the population. Scientists have been studying dyslexia for over 100 years. Brain imaging technology confirms that early identification and intervention can re-wire a dyslexic brain, reducing the academic and emotional impact of reading struggles.

Even though our daughter entered 2nd grade with a diagnosis of dyslexia, we were advised against pursuing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that would provide her with appropriate reading intervention services. An administrator assured us “studies” had shown that she wouldn’t benefit from being pulled out of the classroom and that we were in danger of “stigmatizing” her with special education. When I got off the phone I was shaking with frustration.

We disregarded this advice and moved forward with our request for an IEP. Their reading interventionist was “full.” Our daughter was assigned a paraprofessional who was not a seasoned reading interventionist. Even with a third-party psychological evaluation that cost us thousands of dollars, it took seven months to get her IEP. The subsequent IEP meetings were unnecessarily stressful and unproductive. Our specific questions about the district’s screening and intervention for dyslexic students went unanswered. We did learn that her assigned special education teacher received a scant 24 hours of training in the chosen intervention program.

In retrospect, we should have hired an advocate or perhaps an attorney.

Six weeks into third grade it was clear that our daughter’s emotional and academic needs were not being met. Her classroom teacher lacked training in how to teach a dyslexic student and

demonstrated a distressing lack of interest in learning about dyslexia. The school had no idea how to use their screening and progress monitoring data resulting in a total disconnect between her regular teacher and the special education teacher. We made numerous attempts to reduce this confusion, without success. Our daughter described the shame caused by this disconnect as “crushing.”

Over the two-year period, there was a steady decline in her self-confidence and love of learning. She developed unhealthy coping strategies and her mental health began to suffer. She made herself ill to avoid going to school. As we walked home from school one autumn day, she said, “Mom, a teacher should be a mentor, not your enemy.”

Parents shouldn’t be shunned or shamed for asking informed questions or requesting appropriate services. We certainly should not have to become reading experts. We are not alone in Jackson in terms of the ignorance and educational negligence we experienced. There are multiple families who have been forced to move to other states or place their children in private dyslexia focussed schools. When faced with the realization that we were not in partnership with the school or district and that our daughter’s intervention was not individualized, even after securing her IEP, we withdrew her from public school.

Our daughter will return to public school but only after our district demonstrates that they are actively pursuing timely, evidence-based literacy practices and curricula as required by House Bill 297, legislation that addresses K-3 reading assessment and intervention.

Wyoming public schools can do better. Until then, we’ll work to turn our nightmare into a dream of education that addresses dyslexia with the urgency and skill-based instruction all children deserve.

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March 10, 2020 | Reprinted with permission, Wyoming Tribune Eagle

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