

# Oregon law requires screening students for dyslexia

By Kailey Fiscaro  
The Bulletin

**BEND (AP)** — Legislation passed in Oregon is shining a new light on dyslexia, an often-misunderstood learning disability.

Senate Bill 612, which went into effect in July 2015, requires that every kindergarten and first-grade public school student be screened for risk factors of dyslexia, a learning disability that can make it difficult to learn to read and write. Looking for signs a student may be likely to have dyslexia can allow for early intervention, something that can make a huge difference in how it affects a child, according to dyslexia experts.

Much of what the Senate bill mandates falls on the Oregon Department of Education to administer. The bill requires the education department to hire a dyslexia specialist to support school districts in their new role in screening for risk factors.

Carrie Thomas-Beck, a former special education teacher from the Midwest who co-directed the Oregon Reading First Center, which sought to improve reading among elementary school children, became the state dyslexia specialist in January. She calls dyslexia a “learning difference” for the children who have it. Dyslexia is genetic, she said.

“So they are born with it,”

said Thomas-Beck in a call from Portland. “Where children experience it has to do with early intervention.”

Dyslexia isn’t a one-size-fits-all learning difference. It can be different for different children, Thomas-Beck said.

“Dyslexia by definition is not a difficulty with vision — they see print just like anybody else,” Thomas-Beck said. “It’s a language disability.”

Although some might have believed dyslexic individuals see letters reversed, that’s not the case, according to Thomas-Beck. Individuals with dyslexia have difficulty hearing and isolating sounds in spoken words, she said.

“Listening comprehension is often a strength,” Thomas-Beck said. “Often they are quite articulate and have great vocabulary, but might have trouble with word-finding, or they’ll store a word inaccurately.”

Thomas-Beck said academics sometimes use this example: A student may want to share a thought about volcanoes, and know its meaning, but might say “tornadoes.”

“It goes back to word-finding,” she said.

Dyslexia is generally obvious in a person’s spelling and writing, according to Thomas-Beck. A person might also have trouble organizing ideas, and lack punctuation, as well as connecting words.

Students get so bogged down in just trying to figure out how to spell a word or use basic writing conventions that they can’t get sophisticated ideas to flow out on paper, Thomas-Beck said.

“Orally they could share it in a way that makes perfect sense, but written, they might do it simply,” she said.

Still, she added, it’s different from person to person. Dyslexia can occur as commonly as 1 in 5 people, Thomas-Beck said. Other estimates show about 85 percent of students with learning disabilities have a disability in reading and language processing, according to the International Dyslexia Association.

A lot of times, kids with dyslexia don’t qualify for special education because they do so well in other areas. They might dedicate hours after school to assignments that may only take a half-hour for their peers to complete, Thomas-Beck explained.

Through legislation, the state is building awareness, Thomas-Beck said. Another piece of legislation, House Bill 2412, which went into effect Jan. 1, addresses how teachers are trained for dyslexia education. Decoding Dyslexia, a grass-roots parent organization, was the main group pushing for legislation in Oregon, Thomas-Beck said.

Part of Senate Bill 612

requires that school districts have at least one teacher in each K-5 or K-8 school who has received training related to dyslexia by Jan. 1, 2018.

That teacher will act as a resource who can help fellow teachers carry out the screening of risk factors.

Thomas-Beck worked with stakeholders, including the Oregon Education Association and Oregon School Boards Association, to draft a plan for universal screening. The drafting took about six months, and was submitted to the interim legislative committee on education by September. That committee will decide whether to approve the plan.

The draft plan names a few risk factors to screen for, Thomas-Beck said, including formological awareness, a student’s ability to hear and manipulate sounds in spoken

language; letter-sound correspondences, a student’s ability to map a sound to print; rapid naming; and any family history of difficulty learning to read.

Rapid naming involves asking a child to look at a set of familiar items rapidly presented, such as numbers, letters or pictures of things like a boat or cat, and name them. Schools can find out about family difficulties with learning to read by asking for that information on an enrollment form.

Most schools will continue to use the same Response to Intervention method they already do, in which universal screening helps identify where students belong in multitiered instruction. The tiered approach allows teachers to adapt

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