

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 4, 2022
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New dyslexia bill moves forward with Superintendent Ybarra's support

(BOISE) – Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra Friday celebrated the progress of a newly drafted bill designed to help detect Idaho children with dyslexia early in their education so they can learn to read on an even playing field with their peers.

After a hearing that drew only supportive testimony, the House Education Committee sent House Bill 731 to the House floor with a “do pass” recommendation.

Ybarra co-sponsored a previous House bill calling for dyslexia screening, intervention and teacher training, and a similar bill was introduced separately in the Senate. Elements of both were combined to create the new bill, House Education Chairman Lance Clow said.

“This is a good blend of the best points of the House and Senate bills, informed by dyslexia experts,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “We wanted a path forward. We could and should be doing more for kids with dyslexia, and to help teachers reach them. This is a strong starting point.”

“We all have the same objectives – early screening and help for students with dyslexia, and training and resources for teachers.”

Superintendent Ybarra’s Student Advisory Council identified dyslexia as one of its key issues, and the council member who ignited that interest -- Coeur d’Alene fourth-grader Bridget McNamee -- testified in support of the proposed legislation Friday. The bill is much needed, she said, to provide supports for her sister and other students with dyslexia, who represent “20 percent of the population and 80 percent of struggling readers.”

Also at Friday morning’s hearing, Deputy Superintendent for Communications and Policy Marilyn Whitney noted some important aspects of the new dyslexia bill.

“We appreciate that this bill recognizes the screening measures that we must implement for dyslexia in grades K through 5, and also the professional development for teachers,” Whitney said. “It is also critical to ensure that teachers have resources to implement the interventions needed to support students, so we are very pleased that the bill recognizes that we do need to implement a dyslexia handbook to provide those resources to our teachers in the classroom.”

Also, she said, “the bill provides a realistic timeline for teachers to get professional development on identifying the characteristics of dyslexia and then develop the kinds of interventions that will really help our students. We also appreciate that the fiscal note recognizes that additional resources are needed to implement the provisions of the bill.”

House Bill 731 would create a new full-time position of statewide dyslexia coordinator at the State Department of Education.

The bill calls for using the existing Idaho Reading Indicator test, administered each fall and spring, to identify students in kindergarten through third grade with characteristics of dyslexia, and to enable school districts and charter schools to screen fourth- and fifth graders. The SDE would assist in implementing the “tier 2” dyslexia diagnostic measure that local schools will be required to administer to K-5 students identified as having characteristics of dyslexia.

Asked about the proposed law’s financial impact on schools, Whitney said the department advocates restoring the professional development funding the state cut in a 5 percent holdback in 2020. Idaho teachers and administrators already have to earn credits to maintain certification, and now they will be asked to focus some of those courses on dyslexia, she said. The department will work with districts and charter schools to build awareness of and training on dyslexia into their in-service professional plans and use of literacy intervention funds.

“Yes, there will be extra work here, but our dyslexia expert feels that what’s called for in this piece of legislation is doable for our districts,” Whitney said.

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Attached: A photo of Coeur d’Alene fourth-grader Bridget McNamee testifying