

Parents raise concerns about resources for dyslexic kids in LCSD1

Samir Knox Wyoming Tribune Eagle
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Former Board Clerk Alicia Smith, left, speaks beside then-Chairman Tim Bolin during a Laramie County School District 1 Board of Trustees meeting June 5 at Storey Gym in Cheyenne.
Alyte Katilius/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

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CHEYENNE — Schoolchildren with dyslexia are falling through the cracks in Laramie County School District 1 schools, parents and advocates said at a Board of Trustees meeting Monday.

Megan Hesser, who runs Hesser Literacy Partners in Cheyenne and advocates for students who need extra support with literacy, was the first of several concerned parents and guardians who talked about the personal, and financial, toll that trying to get proper support for their children has been.

Hesser told the Wyoming Tribune Eagle that, including her family, 10 district families have spent a combined sum of about \$490,000 to get the needed support for their children.

“There are 10 of us in this district who have spent a total of \$490,000 to get kids diagnosed, tutoring and other supports,” Hesser wrote in an email to the WTE on Tuesday. She stressed that this was not a complete total, and only included a select group of parents she had tallied.

Hesser is one in a group of parents that has a student who has had trouble getting screened for dyslexia with the district, and getting proper care for their student once they are screened. To address the needs of students who have difficulty reading, in any capacity, she said the district had hired intervention specialists with federal money disbursed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This upcoming year, the funding for those specialists — who are qualified to teach people with dyslexia — will go away, and there doesn’t appear to be a clear solution, Hesser continued.

“They’ve known for years this was coming,” she said, “and didn’t really find a way to either get the problem nipped in the bud where they didn’t need those positions, or find a way to continue funding those positions.”

Hesser has a son in fifth grade enrolled in an LCSD1 school. She first found out about the potential for reading issues with her son after a teacher approached her at a Halloween party, she said. Initially, the teacher said he could catch up to grade level by practicing at home. But Hesser said her son required a deeper intervention than what her family could accomplish after school, prompting her to push for other resources at school.

Realizing that her son, and students like him, could not be adequately served by the school district is what made her become an advocate, she said.

“We’re college-educated parents, but not teachers, and figured out pretty quickly that that wasn’t going to be the solution,” she said. “But that was the only advice (the teacher) really had for us. The Christmas party comes along, he’s even further behind, still no other help or resources. He was getting some small group

support in the classroom, but as we know now, most of that was not evidence-based instruction that they were getting. “So, we kind of started trying to push the school district to, you know, do a little better and have more interventionists that are trained teachers. They’ve done some small steps, but they’re always just a little bit behind, and they never quite seem to catch up to the needs of their students.”

Another speaker at Monday’s meeting was Annie McGlothlin, who has worked with Hesser due to similar issues with her grandson, Jayden. McGlothlin, who has raised Jayden since he was a baby, has retained outside help from a lawyer and a special education advocate to talk with the district and ensure that Jayden is getting the help that he needs.

She told the WTE that her grandson experiences a very severe form of dyslexia that has caused him, and their family, personal distress. It got to the point that Jayden often did not want to go to school, she said.

Now a fifth-grade student at Meadowlark Elementary, Jayden sees an intervention specialist for an hour every day. That person is licensed to teach someone with dyslexia, and has led to great strides in Jayden’s education, McGlothlin said. But she alleged that the district has tried to change Jayden’s Individualized Education Plan to remove those visits with a specialist, which could prove a serious detriment to her grandson’s education.

"I hope it'll be resolved," McGlothlin told the WTE on Thursday. "We're not asking for pie in the sky, we're not asking ... for them to pay for a private placement. ... Let's just do what needs to be done for Jayden, what's working for Jayden."

Other parents also spoke about similar experiences at the Monday board meeting, including Chandel Pine, the mother of a Carpenter Elementary student who died by suicide. She said at the meeting that her son's reading issues contributed to his mental health struggles and that his LCSD2 school did not meet his literacy needs.

After the parents involved spoke, LCSD1 Board of Trustees Chairman Tim Bolin addressed the allegations and said the district would work to help them.

"Looks like we had a theme of talking about reading difficulties and dyslexia, and I'd like to say, first, thank you for your kind comments about some of our staff that are working above and beyond to help our students that struggle in reading," he said, "and, secondly, I'd like to say you have a lot of our senior staff and administrators here that are listening tonight, and we have a board that's listening, so we will try to do whatever we can."

LCSD1 administrative assistant Nicholas Hokanson provided the WTE with an official district statement on the concerns raised at the meeting.

"LCSD1 is deeply committed to ensuring that all students are equipped with the literacy skills to access their learning and be successful in life after public education," the statement, provided on Wednesday, read. "Our commitment to literacy is highlighted in our strategic plan and our ongoing efforts in our Departments of Instruction and Special Services."

The statement went on to describe the areas in which the district is trying to "ensure all ... students are proficient readers." It included a multifaceted approach to curriculum in reading like phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Teachers will also receive ongoing professional development in "the science of reading."

The district will also work on the "development and implementation" of a stronger framework in all schools to detect and intervene for students with reading difficulties. The statement also said the district hopes to have trained reading interventionists for all buildings.

"Additionally, our instructional framework for literacy meets the guidelines established in Wyoming K-3 Reading Assessment and Intervention statute and Chapter 56 rules," the statement read. "LCSD1 is equally committed to ensuring literacy for all our students with disabilities. Our policies and procedures for the identification and provision of special education services for students identified with reading disabilities adhere to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Wyoming Chapter 7 Services for Students with Disabilities rules."

On the topic of dyslexia, the district statement said staff does screen for dyslexia and does provide the necessary intervention for students that have it.

"LCSD1 does evaluate for this disability, adhering to the evaluation and eligibility criteria established in both IDEA and Wyoming Chapter 7 rules and regulations. We provide special education services and supports for this disability as prescribed in a student's IEP. Decisions regarding eligibility and the need for special education services are made by the (IEP) team, which must include the parent. Should parents disagree with the eligibility decision or their student's IEP, they are afforded rights through the Notice of Procedural Safeguards under the IDEA and Wyoming Chapter 7 rules and regulations.

"There is always work to do to improve literacy outcomes for all students. LCSD1's commitment to literacy for all students, grounded in evidence-based knowledge and practices from the science of reading, will remain unwavering."