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Superintendent Ybarra, Student Advisory Council highlight dyslexia as key issue

(BOISE) – Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra’s Student Advisory Council concentrated on dyslexia this week, part of an intensifying focus on the science of reading and the importance of providing all Idaho students with the tools they need to be able to read efficiently and read to learn.

“Detecting and addressing obstacles to reading, including dyslexia, among our youngest students is a key part of my department’s emphasis on early literacy and preparing all students for success in school and in life,” Superintendent Ybarra said.

“I was delighted when my Student Advisory Council chose dyslexia as a main topic for their second meeting – and they want to continue the conversation,” the superintendent said. “I plan to bring the conversation to the Legislature, as well, and help develop a bill to create greater awareness and additional supports for Idaho students with dyslexia.”

Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, has stepped forward to support legislation.

“I recently reached out to Superintendent Ybarra to find out more about what Idaho does to support students with dyslexia after hearing from a constituent on this issue,” Sen. Johnson said. “I was pleased to learn about how the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) helps identify and assist early learners who may struggle with dyslexia, as well as efforts to develop a dyslexia handbook for Idaho teachers to better serve students with this learning disability. I look forward to working with the superintendent to build on the work underway and to draft legislation.”

The IRI includes an at-risk report to help teachers identify students with reading difficulties, including characteristics of dyslexia.

Teacher training is a huge part of Idaho’s path forward in early literacy and dyslexia efforts, Superintendent Ybarra said. Dyslexia, which takes many different forms and levels of severity, makes it more difficult for children to learn to read on their own without specialized help.

In May, the superintendent’s office hosted its first annual Idaho Reading Summit, drawing nearly 400 participants and kicking off a year of professional development opportunities for K-3 teachers to learn the science of reading and increase student literacy and achievement.

More than 190 Idaho K-3 teachers from 56 schools and 40 school districts followed up on the summit by joining the first cohort of the State Department of education's new SMART program – Striving to Meet Achievement in Reading Together – which continues through next May with optional participation in 2022-23.

“Response to the Reading Summit and SMART training has been overwhelmingly positive, and we plan to train many more educators in the science of reading in the near future, increasing our ability to catch dyslexia and other reading difficulties early,” Superintendent Ybarra said. “The SMART program includes three full days of training plus individual classroom coaching, collaborative regional meetings and real-time technical assistance.”

The superintendent's department also advocates adding a fifth comprehensive literacy standard for educator preparation programs that would specifically address teacher candidates' understanding of reading and writing difficulties, which aligns with the State Board of Education's Comprehensive Literacy Plan. In addition, a working group including State Department of Education staff, parents, and reading experts is working on a dyslexia handbook.

Student Advisory Council members were eager to learn about dyslexia at their Dec. 6 meeting, participating in exercises as part of a presentation from two dyslexia experts: College of Idaho Assistant Professor of Education Sally Brown and Alayna Knop, English Language Arts Literacy Assessment Coordinator for the Superintendent of Public Instruction's Office.

Brown and Knop debunked popular myths about dyslexia, noting that it's a specific learning disability that occurs in people of all backgrounds, talents and intellectual levels.

“Einstein was dyslexic,” said Knop, a public schools dyslexia specialist before joining the State Department of Education seven years ago. “And dyslexia has nothing to do with not working hard enough.”

Monday's presentation focused on how people with dyslexia experience written language and what school is like for students with dyslexia. Four of the 13 Student Advisory Council members said Monday that they have peers or family members who have been diagnosed with dyslexia.

The students watched a short video, provided by Decoding Dyslexia Idaho, of Idaho students with dyslexia talking about their school experiences. Comments included: “I feel like I'm standing out, and I want to blend in,” and “I hope one day they'll understand that I'm smarter than the scores on the paper.”

Various efforts are underway in Idaho to increase public understanding, teacher training and student success.

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