

David Chard: Help students with dyslexia make it to college prepared

Educators must realize that they, too, have contributions to make

08:32 AM CDT on Thursday, November 1, 2007

Thousands of educators, researchers, families and advocates are gathering in Dallas this week to share their insights into dyslexia – one of the most common learning disabilities and a major obstacle to academic success for otherwise capable learners.

The International Dyslexia Association's annual conference is a good fit for Dallas, as Texans frequently have taken the lead in assisting students with learning differences. But more needs to be done – particularly when it comes to helping these young people make the leap to college.

Dyslexia affects 5 to 17 percent of the population, or up to 50 million Americans, and is characterized by an unexpected difficulty in reading in children and adults who otherwise possess the intelligence, motivation and educational opportunities considered necessary to develop reading skills. Many dyslexics face their biggest hurdles in grammar, understanding textbook material and writing essays.

Texas was the first state to require school districts to identify children with dyslexia and provide specific intervention for them.

Dallas is home to one of the most active regional professional organizations, the Dallas branch of the International Dyslexia Association, and many private and public schools in Dallas have a long history of providing special services to students with learning differences, including dyslexia, dysgraphia and attention disorders.

At Southern Methodist University's School of Education and Human Development, researchers and reading specialists have developed training and research projects supported by federal and state grants as well as generous foundations to answer some of the most critical questions about the development of students who struggle to read.

Texas' efforts on behalf of students with dyslexia have been led by Geraldine "Tincy" Miller, an SMU alum who has served on the State Board of Education for more than 20 years. As a reading specialist and academic language therapist, Ms. Miller recognizes the importance of implementing scientifically based instructional practices for students with a range of reading difficulties. She has championed the need for Texas schools to serve all children, including those who struggle to learn to read, and she has added her voice to those calling for Texas' "dyslexia law" to be uniformly enforced.

While much has been accomplished, more work lies ahead. The opportunity to pursue higher education should be a minimum standard for all Americans. Approximately 35 percent of students with learning disabilities are attending colleges and universities, up from 15 percent in 1987.

There, in addition to taking on the tougher curricula, increased workloads and loss of a close support network that most college students face, they also sometimes face a bias because of their need for accommodations, such as extra time for tests or projects and private testing rooms.

It is time for all educators to recognize that individuals with learning differences have contributions to make to

our community as scholars, teachers and professionals. The accommodations they require to be successful are a means of providing these students access to knowledge and the chance to demonstrate their potential.

This week's conference in Dallas provides the perfect opportunity for educators to share research and learn together about the latest science and practices in addressing these students' needs.

Globalization and changing demands on our workforce require that students in Texas schools be prepared to enter college with the skills necessary to be successful. Students with dyslexia or other learning differences are not exempt. We must work to remove obstacles to learning and allow these students to participate fully.

David Chard is dean of the School of Education and Human Development at SMU. His e-mail address is dchard@smu.edu. Learn more about learning differences at smu.edu/learndifferently.

LONE STAR LITERACY

The 58th annual International Dyslexia Association conference, "Literacy and Language in the Lone Star State," runs through Saturday at the Adams Mark Hotel in Dallas.

Session topics include learning strategies, parenting issues and bilingual education, and Geraldine "Tincy" Miller of the State Board of Education will speak today on the Texas dyslexia law as part of a fundraising lunch.

For a complete schedule, visit www.interdys.org.