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Parents key to improving school dyslexia programs

By Jennifer Radcliffe
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Paula Farish realized the seriousness of her son's reading problem when he was just a kindergartner.

Five-year-old Reed looked up at her one night after his bedtime story and said, "Maybe if I die real quick, I won't have to go to school tomorrow."

Reed cried every morning, and his fingers sometimes had to be peeled off the door frame so he could be taken to school. But teachers in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district kept dismissing Farish's fear that Reed had dyslexia.

"That's when I really started to fight," the Bedford woman said. "It's like that animal instinct to protect your young."

Like hundreds of Texas parents, Farish was up against a school district that had to be compelled to comply with a state law that requires public schools to identify students with dyslexia as early as possible and to offer them personalized instruction.

Dyslexia experts encourage parents to educate themselves on the law and to be persistent in making school districts comply. Every moment that parents wait is a moment that their children fall behind in reading, they say.

Research shows that if children don't read at grade level by the fourth grade, there is a 75 percent chance they will always struggle to read.

"You need to educate yourself," said Southlake resident Sue Cantrell, who launched a battle against the Carroll school district seven years ago. "The district is like a business relationship. They're not your friend."

The burden falls to parents because most districts diagnose dyslexia in very few students. More than half of the 16 North Texas districts the *Star-Telegram* surveyed for this series provide dyslexia instruction to less than 1 percent of their students, despite studies that show as many as 20 percent of children may have the learning disability.

In some cases, school officials don't seem to understand dyslexia or its symptoms. In others, the instruction they offer does not meet the standards set by law.

But the law includes no penalties for districts that don't comply.

Parents succeed

Farish and fellow parent Nancy Hill, who also has a dyslexic son, began their campaign last school year for a better dyslexia program in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford district. At that time, 29 of the district's 20,000 students, or 0.15 percent, received dyslexia instruction. Only students who failed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills reading test were allowed in the program, which taught reading through drills and lessons on a computer program.

At a series of public and private meetings this year, Farish and Hill helped persuade the district to overhaul its program.



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Reed Farish, 9, does homework with his mother, Paula. Paula Farish and another mother successfully urged the Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district to revamp its dyslexia program.

"Everywhere we go, we have to educate people on what dyslexia is," Hill said.

At a board meeting in June, Hill told trustees: "We have a group of students in the district who have been ignored. The ability to read is the basic foundation for all children. We cannot wait even one more year."

In the summer, the district hired consultant Debbie Easom of Dyslexia Solutions, who agreed that the district's program did not meet the letter of the law.

Assistant Superintendent Steve Chapman said, "The district did listen to their concerns."

The school district has started using two multisensory phonics programs to teach students with dyslexia. It added \$160,000 to the budget to train teachers and increase diagnostic efforts. Officials expect the number of students in the program to increase.

The district's new program will be among the best in the state, Easom told trustees in September.

Working with schools

Parents who believe their children are not receiving the proper instruction must demand answers from their school districts, said Elizabeth Cantrell, director of dyslexia outreach for Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas, which specializes in helping children with dyslexia.

"Communicate with the school. Ask them about the program. Please do not assume that everything is all right at school," she advised parents of dyslexic children during a recent seminar at the hospital.

Sue Cantrell knew she had to act quickly when she moved from the Keller school district to the Carroll district seven years ago. She wanted to make sure the new schools could educate her three children, who have learning disabilities.

She joined a district improvement committee and began making her case. To help explain dyslexia, she brought in experts from The Shelton School in Dallas, which serves students with learning disabilities.

"We quoted the law and said, 'You're not meeting the criteria,' " said Cantrell, who works at The Shelton School.

After much persuading, Carroll decided in the late 1990s to pay for four teachers to be trained as certified academic language therapists at Southern Methodist University. The district began offering the Multisensory Teaching Approach, a curriculum for dyslexic students.

"The dyslexia program I don't think would be here except for the parents," said Cathy Friar, head of Carroll's special-education department.

This year, Carroll began teaching all first-graders using a classroom phonics program. District leaders decided that it is such an effective way to teach reading that every student should receive such instruction. Experts consider it one of the strongest programs in the Metroplex.

Dr. Jeffrey Black of Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children said parents must know the law. They must be persistent and keep extensive written records, he said.

And if schools still don't comply with the law, "you could put them on notice that you're familiar with the Texas dyslexia law and that they perhaps have programs that are not in compliance," he said.

Whom to call

Experts say parents can encourage their school districts to become more familiar with the state dyslexia law by calling Texas' dyslexia coordinator, Helen Macik, at (800) 232-3030, ext. 1410.

