

# The Wayne RESA Roundtable S1.E8 - The Dyslexia Dialogue

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## SPEAKERS

Celeste Johnson, Sarah Jones

### **Celeste Johnson** 00:15

Hello everyone. My name is Celeste Johnson. I am a Special Education Consultant here at Wayne RESA. Thank you for tuning in to the Wayne RESA roundtable Podcast. Today, we are talking about dyslexia and the new dyslexia bill in Michigan. To help us unpack this, we're joined by Sarah Jones, a literacy consultant, here at RESA. Welcome to the show Sarah!

### **Sarah Jones** 00:39

Hi Celeste, thank you so much for inviting me. I'm super excited to be here today.

### **Celeste Johnson** 00:44

All right well let's get into it. Sarah can you tell us what is dyslexia, and how can we best support children with dyslexia through their learning journey?

### **Sarah Jones** 00:54

So first I would like to define dyslexia, and I'm going to use the definition that the International Dyslexia Association and our dyslexia handbook in Michigan are referred to. And it says that it's a specific learning disorder that is neurobiological in origin. It's characterized by difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit and phonological components of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities, even though teachers can provide effective classroom instruction. Aside from that, there are some secondary consequences that come up as a consequence of having dyslexia, such as reading problems with reading comprehension that will reduce their experience and impede growth in vocabulary and background knowledge. All of these things can also lead to social and emotional and behavioral difficulties with students. It's not about intelligence or the effort or poor teaching. It's about how the brain processes language, and especially how it recognizes and connects sounds with words. Some students that have dyslexia have trouble matching letters and sounds and blending them to

make words, and that can be very challenging for them. This is because reading takes a lot of extra time and energy, and if you have dyslexia, this can be an even more laborious task for students. You may even notice students struggling to sound out words, mixing up letters or words, like was and saw; spelling them differently throughout paragraphs, and then ultimately just avoiding writing because it feels so very frustrating. Because of this, and because reading takes so much effort, comprehension sometimes suffers, not because the student doesn't understand, but because they're focusing so hard on decoding words.

**Celeste Johnson** 03:04

Thank you for that, Sarah. You know there are a lot of myths out there. For example, some people believe that dyslexia just means sing letters backward. Can you share some common misconceptions and what the research actually tells us?

**Sarah Jones** 03:19

Absolutely and thanks for asking that, Celeste. There are so many myths about dyslexia out there, and I really want to go and talk about a few of them. And I want to start with the one that you just named, which was seeing letters backwards. Lots of people feel that this is a characteristic of dyslexia, and it's not. Dyslexia is a language based problem, and when we think of kids with dyslexia we do often, you know, see a lot of the old sayings of letters being reversed and seeing words the opposite way. But that's just not the case. And so while that is a challenge for us to really reconcile these myths, the symptoms of dyslexia are a lot deeper than just the visual representation or misrepresentation of letters and words. So the second myth that I would like to bring up is that dyslexia only affects reading, and this is not true, because dyslexia can span across all subject areas, because it is a language based problem. It will eventually go into those secondary consequences where writing and spelling and vocabulary and even oral expression is really affected if the students don't have those foundational skills in which they need in order to decode and read words accurately. Some of the research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development shows that dyslexia really stems from difficulties, as I've said, with phonological processing and just remembering those sounds and sequencing them and just retrieving those words really quickly with automaticity, which is what we want kids to be able to do. And it's because of that some of those secondary consequences can really make spelling and writing really feel exhausting for kids.

**Celeste Johnson** 05:30

Okay.

**Sarah Jones** 05:31

The third method I would like to address is that students with dyslexia just need to try harder that they're lazy or they don't show that effort, and that's really heartbreaking when teachers and educators and even parents sometimes feel as if "my kid's just not trying hard enough." That's just not the case, and it's very difficult for a dyslexic student or adult for that matter, really feel as if the effort in which they're putting into the work that they're doing is not enough. And so even through Yale University and the brain imaging studies that they have done, it shows that the brains of students with dyslexia process reading differently, and it's not less effective that they process it differently, it's just they do it in a different way. And with structured, explicit instruction, these types of instructional methods really can

help build new pathways for reading to improve in students that have dyslexia. The fourth myth is dyslexia goes away with age. It does not. I am actually a dyslexic. My daughter is dyslexic, and it is something that I have dealt with my entire life. I have developed strategies on learning how to combat the difficulties that I have with language and processing language accurately. But again, with the right support, whereas I may not and my daughter and anyone else in the world that has dyslexia may not ever, not have it with them. It just becomes a part of who you are, and you learn it and adjust, and you can be very successful. There are very many famous, successful people that have dyslexia, and we really have to show students that being different is good. The fifth myth that I would like to bring about is that students with dyslexia can't succeed. And just like I was saying several famous people. I mean, when we think of people like Steve Jobs and Whoopi Goldberg and Muhammad Ali and even our presidents like John F Kennedy and George Bush, they all had dyslexia, but they're very accomplished and successful people. Sometimes with dyslexia, the creative side of people come out a little bit more, but that's all about who they are, and it makes them the person that they are. So dyslexia does not mean that a person is incapable of learning. It just means we learn differently, and we need to embrace that, and as educators and as parents, we have to give students the opportunity to be successful in the way that they are and can be successful so that they are no longer feeling as if they just need to give up before they have even started.

**Celeste Johnson** 08:47

Wow thank you, Sarah for your transparency and your vulnerability in helping us debunk the myths and just really sharing your story. What are some early warning signs families and educators can look for especially in the younger grades?

**Sarah Jones** 09:04

Yeah, so this is a really difficult question, because we want to keep in mind the age of the student, because we know that things are developmental, and while we don't want to quickly put students in boxes and label them, we do want to be mindful to make sure that we are noticing signs of difficulty where language is concerned. So when we think about our preschool and our kindergarten students, we really want to observe and listen, and we want to observe and listen to simple things that they do, like recognizing rhymes and learning nursery rhymes. Even though that's simple, you can start to hear if there are some difficulties within the language. If they're having difficulty with learning the letters and the letter names, that was the one thing that I will say that with my daughter, I picked up on immediately. When she was in preschool, she would come home from school and I would say, "Okay, let's do some work." And she's like, "Yeah, no, mom," and she actually has a speech impediment too, and she would say, "I don't want to do any yetters today." And I was like, "you don't want to do any yetters?" And we would laugh about that. She's like, "Yeah, no, I don't like yetters." And I was like, "Okay." And in the beginning, I just left it alone. But I just steadily, you know, tried to tap into, well, what is it that you do like and I did see this, she kind of went over to more of the hands on creative things that you know stimulated her mind. And knowing that as a parent and as an educator, and even as a mom that has dyslexia, I was able to notice right away, like, I think she may be having some struggles, right? And, and those are just the things that we want parents to be able to notice, right? So then they can go to the schools and talk to the educators and say, Hey, I'm noticing this at home, are you noticing this? Those early signs, because then the teacher can provide those students with some explicit and structured strategies to really see if the student is struggling with those letters and names and sounds.

Some other things for kindergarten and preschool students are maybe they're having some problems remembering sequences like the days of the week or the alphabet. And for my daughter, I know she could come home and tell me the alphabet, and then I could ask her five minutes later to tell me the alphabet again, and she would skip letters. So just little things that you know you may not notice right off, but just to listen out for. And then also just the mispronunciation and of words and mixing up sounds can also be clues for the those younger students. But again, I would just caution not to quickly label a child so young, because it can very well be developmental, and we have to give kids the opportunity to learn at their pace, but learn in a way in which is academically successful for them. So as we move into some of the some of the other grades where we think of like more of the traditional learning for grades first through third, some things that you may want to look out for is if a child's reading is slow, if it's laborious, if, you see them making guesses at words, just decoding and having some difficulty with unfamiliar words and knowing the sounds in one in one word, and then not knowing them in the next. And then, if you see them avoiding reading and getting frustrated with reading, these were all signs that I saw with my daughter. She avoided working with letters, she avoided wanting to write her name. She did not want to do those things because it took a lot of thought and a lot of effort for her to do that. And I wish I had a visual here to show you like the brain and and how it works. And when you think about how the part of the brain in the back of your brain that brings out the automaticity of those letters and sounds and matches them all together, is not the brain that a dyslexic child uses. They use the front of their brain when they are reading. And in that, in that process is not automatic, and it causes them to have to take the words, and if you could visualize it, taking it back to the back of their brain to then come back forward in order for them to decode and encode and read those words. So just some of those things to think about when, you're dealing with grades and kids in grades one through three, but just to remember that reading doesn't necessarily or not being able to read and to code words and and just having those troubles doesn't necessarily mean that they automatically have dyslexia. So these are just some some characteristics and some things that you want to be aware of so that you can get some support from school, from the teacher, get more information, so that you can help your child the best way that you can as a parent. When we think about grades four and beyond, these are when some of those secondary consequences really take hold. Because if you have struggled with your foundational pieces and you don't have a solid foundational understanding of your letters and sounds, that is going to transition into not being able to read fluently, and it will definitely affect the comprehension, because if a student is spending so much time trying to decode words, they're going to lose comprehension, and they're going to have to go back, maybe and reread or sometimes skip words all together, because they're going through such an a lot of effort to read those words. So to thinking about the difficulties with reading fluency, when you think about writing with older students, you may see some problems with their organization and having their writing written in such a way that it follows a flow. They have trouble, sometimes, with the multi steps, being able to follow a sequence of events. And that was one thing that I did with my with my daughter, when I would give her things to do, I would have her say back to me, what exactly is it that I want you to do, and to give me those steps so that I understood even orally, that she understood what I was saying. Because even though we think about dyslexia as a reading and decoding, it does affect that oral language as well and how they are processing the things that are coming to them orally as well. So just to ask them, "Hey, what did I say? Repeat that back to me." And then lastly, for some of our older students, their reading can sometimes be slow, and slow reading isn't bad. I'm not saying you have to have a certain rate of reading to be a good reader. I read slow. Lots of people read slow, but those are just some things that you can key in on, just to see, like,

why are you reading slow? Like, what's going on? Are you understanding what you're reading? Are you having problems decoding some of these multi syllabic words? Just as a parent to get a better insight as to what's going on in that kid's brain, because they may not want to come out and actually say, "I'm having trouble." So yeah.

**Celeste Johnson** 17:33

Thank you for breaking down some of those early warning signs and two things that stood out to me that our families and educators can do that based on what you said is listen and observe, observe and listen, and if we start with those two things, we will be better equipped to recognize some of those early warning signs and to support and provide them with the appropriate tools that they need in order to be successful throughout their learning journey. So thank you for that.

**Sarah Jones** 18:05

Yeah and if I may.

**Celeste Johnson** 18:06

Mhm.

**Sarah Jones** 18:07

just in you saying listen and observe as a parent, that's I mean, parents don't always have the background and the knowledge, right, but just to be active in your kid's life and to hear them and to read with them and to learn them. You know, as a parent, if your child is having some struggles with something, and I know sometimes parents don't like to bring these struggles up in the school, right? But your teachers are the ones that are best equipped to help and to give further recommendation as to what you can do to help your kid at home, and even to have that that home and school connection is very important, because then you're having those conversations with the teacher. You're abreast of what's going on. You're not in the dark, so you're not finding out in third grade that your child is having some difficulties, right? If you are paying attention, listening and having those conversations with your teachers and your literacy consultants that are at your schools, those coaches to say, "Hey, I'm noticing this." That is the first entry to really making sure that your kid is getting the support that they need at school.

**Celeste Johnson** 19:30

Creating that brief space to have those conversations with both, you know, from school to home and home to school, that's it's important. We're in this together. You know, Michigan recently passed the dyslexia bill, which is big news for many of our families and schools. Can you explain what this bill is and why it's significant?

**Sarah Jones** 19:50

Yes, absolutely. So pa 146 public act 146 is often referred to as the K 12 literacy dyslexia law, and it is k 12, because we know that dyslexia can span from birth to adulthood, right? And we want to make sure that every student that touches our Michigan schools are receiving the support that they need. No matter what age level they are, they still need to receive that support. So this law was passed in 2024 and it was a bipartisan effort from legislators in Michigan, because we need to improve literacy, just

across the board. And lawmakers really wanted to reform the Read by Grade Three law, which had some provisions in it that were really unpopular, like the retention provision that was in the law. And lots of people you know did not agree with this, and research actually has shown that retention does not work, right, but explicit and intentional and structured instruction can help students that have dyslexia. So with that in mind, they wanted to make sure that they developed and created a law that really addressed helping students that may have dyslexia. The previous law didn't have any provisions in it that dealt with dyslexia, so they wanted to provide a few things with this law. They wanted to make sure that there were provisions in place for students with dyslexia. They wanted to make sure that all schools in Michigan used curricular resources that were aligned with the science of reading and structured literacy. They wanted to ensure that all educators that touch reading are trained in dyslexia to understand the characteristics. This law is not meant to diagnose dyslexia. The School screenings are not meant to diagnose dyslexia. The screenings are only meant to alert educators that there may be difficulties that a student may be displaying and that these students need that extra dose of that structured, explicit instruction to help them along the way to become proficient readers and writers in Michigan for literacy and so. So that's why and the how of the law. And the law actually will start in 27 and 28 school year, and at that time, all students will need to be screened, and they will be screened for characteristics of dyslexia. If those students are showing those characteristics, then other things happen. So the students will receive an IREP, a student will receive a plan that identifies what it is that they need to be working on. Schools will need to provide intervention that is also aligned with the science of reading and structured literacy. And the major thing is that educators and and legislators that really pushed for this bill. Really want that early identification to happen so that we're not waiting to fail. We are being proactive, and we are helping students on the onset. So even if, and then we can go back to those preschool and kindergarten teachers, those younger kids that are having difficulties, that doesn't mean that they have dyslexia it can be very developmental. But we want to make sure that we are looking at them early on, so that if we see, oh no, this isn't developmental. This is a little bit more than just a student and kid going through the motions of learning, then we're able to really address that. And then I also just want to add that we do have a large population of multilingual learners in our schools across Michigan and they are also addressed within this law. And one of the major caveats that I want to make sure is lifted is that we know that multilingual learners are already struggling with learning the new language, and so as educators, we need to be mindful that when we're looking and screening our multilingual learners, that we are making sure that if they are having difficulties, that these difficulties are showing in their native language and not just in the new language in which they're learning, because it could definitely just be a language barrier and something that they need to work on through the process of learning the language. So just making sure that we are being mindful of what we're doing and how we're doing it when we are looking at our multilingual learners. Lastly, I would just like to mention that while pa 146 is has its best intentions, it's not a fix all. It's the first step in the right direction in making sure that students are identified early and receiving the support that they need to ensure that families are included in the process schools have the guidance and the accountability to deliver the evidence based instruction to help those students not only become successful academically, but also to help those students feel seen and supported, which is very huge when you think about the confidence and the motivation that a student needs to be successful in student in school, but also for a student that is struggling to have that confidence and motivation really is really important, because they may not even understand themselves while they're having this struggle, but to have all of the support

that we are trying to give them through the implementation of this law, I think is a beautiful first step to helping kids in Michigan achieve better in literacy.

**Celeste Johnson** 26:29

Sarah, I'm so glad you brought up the multilingual learners, because oftentimes when we see a student struggling, we could be looking from the lens of the language that we are teaching in, i.e., it could be English, right, where maybe that student in their native language is not presenting the same characteristics in their native language. So we're comparing them both, to consider them both, and not just one or the other I think is powerful, as well as our students who may not have a language. You know, we have students who are learning American Sign Language for the first time, or maybe developing a language, any language, for the first time, for whatever reason, and so really giving them that grace and that space to develop, and not just automatically say that these are characteristics of dyslexia. And last but not least, but to mention, even our African American students who may utilize Ebonics and drop off some of those sounds and and words and take out some of the words as a part of their culture or any other culture, not just African Americans. We have to be aware of who we are as educators and as families to make sure that we do like you said, observe and listen first, starting there

**Sarah Jones** 27:53

Being responsive.

**Celeste Johnson** 27:54

and yeah, being responsive starting there, so that we can support our students and understand who they are. And part of understanding who they are is first acknowledging and knowing who we are so that we're not filtering who they are through a lens that is only one sided. So really taking the time to listen and observe, like you previously mentioned.

**Sarah Jones** 28:20

Listen and observe, right?

**Celeste Johnson** 28:22

Yes, that's right. Sarah, thank you. Thank you for sharing your expertise and your insights with us today. I mean dyslexia often, you know, is misunderstood, but with the right support and the legislation like the Michigan dyslexia bill, we can move toward a future where all students have the tools and support they need to thrive. Once again, thank you for tuning in to the Wayne RESA roundtable podcast, and we'll see you next time.