

FIRST PERSON: HOW AND WHY I CONTINUE PUSH FOR COMPREHENSIVE, STATE-LEVEL DYSLEXIA LEGISLATION

Legislative proposals include universal screening tool, multi-tiered system of support



by Michigan Sen. Jim Runestad
(SenJRunestad@senate.michigan.gov)

*Iganmie tyrnig to rade in a wrlod wehre
lal yuro wrsod aer jmubled.*

If you are a “normal” reader, the sentence you just read makes no sense. But for the estimated 108,000 to 217,000 children in Michigan with dyslexia, it is how the sentence “Imagine trying to read in a world where all your words are jumbled” might look.

Growing up as a student with dyslexia, I know how difficult it can be when this disorder is not properly addressed. And as a former educator, I can also testify how much better it can be for students to get the proper training and instruction when dealing with dyslexia.

Several decades after I graduated from high school, my home state of Michigan still does not have a comprehensive strategy to address dyslexia. I have heard from countless parents, teachers, students and administrators that there is simply not enough help for those with this disability.

This has contributed, at least in part, to the fact that approximately one in three Michigan fourth-graders do not have adequate reading skills. In order to improve childhood literacy and open new opportunities for students at all levels, there needs to be a much more focused approach to not only screening for dyslexia, but to supporting those dealing with it.

EARLIER THE HELP, THE BETTER

Dyslexia is a learning disability characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition and by poor decoding abilities. The disorder is the most common learning disability that affects reading and writing.

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Science shows us that good reading skills are the basis for future academic or professional success. Study after study also indicates how important it is to intervene early on.

Researchers have found that it is easier to help struggling readers in kindergarten and first grade than later on, and that struggling readers need help “early and often.” The sooner they get the help, the better off they will be.

But while more than two-thirds of states already have programs in place to identify children who show signs of dyslexia, Michigan law barely mentions dyslexia at all.

In the year 2021, having no statewide strategy to screen and treat dyslexia is simply unacceptable.

That is why I, along with several of my Republican and Democratic colleagues in the Michigan Senate, introduced legislation last year that would finally do something to fix that. Michigan Senate Bills 1172–1175 would have provided much-needed steps to address dyslexia early on in a student’s schooling.

Under the legislation, educators would have been adequately trained to understand dyslexia, to identify students who are struggling with learning the code, and to teach these students to break the code. A five-member advisory committee of individuals

who understand the struggle firsthand would have employed their experiences and knowledge to develop a dyslexia resource guide.

Other bills in the legislative package would have required school districts to screen children each year from kindergarten through third grade for reading difficulties using a universal screening assessment. If the assessment indicated that a child was experiencing difficulty learning to decode, the school district would have to provide a multi-tiered system of support.

Legislation would also have required our state’s teacher-preparation institutions to offer instruction on the characteristics of dyslexia, the consequences of dyslexia, evidence-based interventions, and methods to develop a classroom infrastructure that meets the needs of these students.

The Michigan Department of Education would have provided schools with “instructional methods and curriculum resources” that work for students with dyslexia by the 2023-24 school year.

All in all, this package of bills would have offered the first comprehensive statewide strategy to help students struggling with dyslexia.

It is a strategy that is long overdue.

In developing the bills, we worked with experts in the field, including Lauren A. Katz, one of the founders of the Literacy, Language, and Learning Institute in Ann Arbor, Mich. Dr. Katz said the legislation has far-reaching potential.

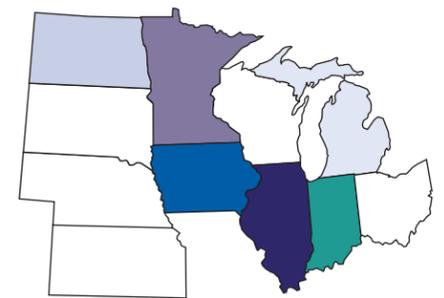
“Michigan children, no matter where they live or how much money their parents have, will receive instruction and intervention that is grounded in cognitive science,” Katz said of the bills. “And they will receive this instruction and intervention early — during a critical window of time, before negative consequences have kicked in.”

Nikolai Vitti, superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District, said in a statement that “these proposed bills are the most promising K-12 reform-minded legislation I have seen since being superintendent in Detroit.” Vitti is another advocate, like me, who has personally experienced dyslexia.

BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR BILLS

In a time of great disunity in our country, this bipartisan dyslexia legislation shows that folks from both sides of the aisle can still come together for the good of those we represent.

DYSLEXIA-RELATED REQUIREMENTS IN MIDWEST*



- Screening of students, pre-service and in-service training for teachers, interventions for students
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- Pre-service training for teachers and interventions for students
- Screening of and interventions for students

* Other Midwestern states have dyslexia-related laws, but no requirements as described above. Michigan’s law is not specific to dyslexia but does include language that could help identify students with this learning disorder and provide interventions.

Source: National Center on Improving Literacy

While we may not agree on everything, we can at least agree on the need to give every student the opportunities they deserve. Together we can make a real difference for the most vulnerable.

I have made it my mission to work with whomever I can to stand up for the forgotten. And if there is anyone who needs to be remembered, empowered and emboldened in our school systems, it is students with dyslexia.

While we missed a great opportunity to pass meaningful reform last year, I will be reintroducing this legislation again this term, because these students need help now.

There is a long way to go to get dyslexia reforms passed, at least in our state. But I am optimistic that we will get it done.

With support from parents who want the best education for their kids, teachers who want to learn how to better serve students and leaders who are willing to make a difference, there is nothing we can’t accomplish.

Michigan Sen. Jim Runestad was first elected to the state Senate in November 2018 after serving two terms in the House. He is a 2016 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).



Michigan Sen. Jim Runestad grew up as a student with dyslexia. He is now hoping to pass legislation to help current and future students in his home state dealing with this disorder.

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

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