

THE GARDNER NEWS

GARDNER, MA
PUBLISHING SINCE 1869

Your Locally Owned Community Newspaper for Gardner, Ashburnham, Hubbardston, Phillipston, Templeton, Westminster, Winchendon

Thursday, December 15, 2016

Schools tackle dyslexia

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WINCHENDON — How often have you heard someone say after making a mistake that “it must be my dyslexia?”

For large number of people, however, dyslexia is no joke and the condition is keeping many young students from performing up to their capability in the classroom.

According to a University of Michigan study, dyslexia affects between five and 17 percent of the U.S. population and up to 80 percent of students with reading disabilities.

Kristina Mecelicaite, the director of pupil services, says that latter figure is likely reflected in Winchendon schools.

She says by addressing dyslexia early on, parents and teachers can help students avoid academic frustration and do their best in the classroom.

That’s why screening for the problem begins with children heading to kindergarten. “We screen before they come in,” she says, “in April or May, before entering kindergarten.

That way we can determine how affected the children are.”

Mecelicaite says there are specialists at Memorial School (prekindergarten through grade 2) who employ the Orton Gillingham program.

The program is a sequential, phonics-based system that teaches the basics of word formation before whole meanings.

“They do ‘double dosing,’” she says.

“Each class has a 90-minute reading block.

When the block is finished, the teachers will pull some students from the group or class to read to them.

They may do it individually or in a group.”

Mecelicaite says more boys are diagnosed with dyslexia than girls.

“Boys display multiple behaviors sometimes associated with ADD (attention deficit disorder).

The question is, which came first, the ADD or the dyslexia?”

“We are working on aligning the reading curriculum from Memorial to Toy Town (grades 3-5).

We’re planning that for next year.”

“But not all reading-disabled children have dyslexia,” she says.

“They could also have memory development delay.

It’s complex.”

“We’re looking at how to address students’ disabilities.

Teachers have a lot of flexibility.

They're allowed to innovate.

Not every child learns in the same way, and not every child has the same level of dyslexia."

Mecelicaite said the mission is to level the playing field for kids who have trouble reading.

"Our goal is for students to read at age level by the time they graduate," she said.

"Kids with dyslexia get frustrated and with older students frustration can affect motivation."

Still, said Mecelicaite, "Dyslexics come up with ingenious ways to solve problems."

Some well-known dyslexics include Albert Einstein; Virgin Group founder and chairman Richard Branson; Pablo Picasso; Microsoft founder Bill Gates; movie producer Steven Spielberg; boxing champ Muhammad Ali; NBA legend Magic Johnson; journalist Anderson Cooper; and singer/actor Cher.

"Another goal is to minimize the impact of dyslexia," said Mecelicaite. "We teach adaptive strategies.

That's particularly important for taking notes in the higher grades."

Still, the real work begins at the youngest ages.

"We monitor progress at Memorial and Toy Town," she said.

"We employ DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills).

Children fall into color categories, red, yellow and green.

Red is the most troubling and requires intensive work.

Yellow requires responsive intervention, where the work isn't quite as demanding. And green is for kids who are progressing well."

"There are so many factors," Mecelicaite said.

"I don't know if there's a cure for dyslexia, though that would be the ultimate goal. Right now we teach adaptive strategies.

I think we do a great job here in Winchendon, but that doesn't mean we can't do better.

The kiddos deserve our best effort."

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