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From: Ronda Schlumbohm <rondaschlumbohm@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, February 10, 2020 6:50 AM
To: Senate Education
Cc: rabybrandy@gmail.com
Subject: Teaching all of our children

February 10, 2020

Dear Senate Education Committee,

I am writing to help explain the complex nature of teaching a child to read. I have been listening to the invited testimony to try to understand what the Senate Committee may need to understand about teaching young children. In my previous letter to Senators Begich and Coghill, I explained how screening tests are fallible and not one hundred percent accurate and reliable like we wish they would be.

I appreciate how dedicated you are to our state's youngest learners and I applaud your work. If you are reading this, I applaud your dedication even more.

I care deeply about all of Alaska's children. In Salcha, I have had the honor of teaching some of the most challenging children to learn to read. Two students were Peter Raby and a blind student. I am including Peter's name with the permission of his mother, Brandy Raby. The other student, I do not have permission for because I don't have his contact information now. However, his story is no less important. My hope is that you see how different approaches need to be used for different readers, using a student's strengths as part of knowing where to teach, which means a deep knowledge base. Understanding the developmental levels of children helps teachers make the best decisions. Teachers cannot do this alone. Support staff are critical with the success of helping our most challenging children.

About twelve years ago, I taught an autistic child to read and I'll tell you how. Peter is minimally verbal. His diagnosis is Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADD and the possibility of dyslexia. He can say some very limited things, but he cannot speak in full sentences all the time. Salcha taught Peter as a team. Before Peter entered school, I watched and interacted with him in our community. Peter swam with my children in a pond where the moms would all talk and the kids would swim. I saw how Peter was just like any other child. He wanted to swim and splash in that pond. One deeply moving thing that Peter did was to grab onto the tail of our black Labrador, Rose and she would pull Peter around. Peter was a big boy. He had on a life jacket but his movements were sporadic. Somehow Rose understood this and pulled him around the pond. Rose taught me an important lesson about helping children become successful. Even though Peter was not in school yet, it was then that I developed an understanding that all things are possible with Peter. You just need to figure out what works.

Fast forward a couple of years when Peter came to school, I approached being his teacher with the same attitude. Peter was in Salcha three years from first grade through third grade. I taught Peter in second grade. I knew the team of Peter's mother Brandy, father Kenneth, Amy Viltrakis the special education teacher, Peter's one-on-one aide, and I could make this work. Inside, Peter was a boy that could do what his typical peers could do if he had help. Peter may not be able to reach the same levels at the same time, but he could learn to read. It was my job to teach him how to read and it was a team effort.

Because Peter could not speak in whole sentences, we needed an approach that worked. Peter needed to be taught to read by sight. Fortunately, Peter had a one-on-one aide. She sat with him to help him do many things that the other kids did. He listened to stories and worked in the classroom as much as possible. Peter would often get excited and flap his arms and his aide was there to help calm him when needed or take him out of the classroom if he became overly stimulated. Peter could not be taught to read using methods that work with most children. What I discovered was that dedication from all the team and careful observation told us what was and was not working. Peter couldn't sound out words. The team then decided that teaching him by sight was an answer. We knew that repetition would be the key to giving Peter a foundation of words so he could read. Peter's attention was short so we used short books to read over and over again. The stack of books would be about six inches high on the desk. The idea was to get Peter to see words

over and over and to work with his short attention, not against it. He would only want to turn a few pages and be done with that book. Because of Peter's minimal verbal skills, writing would be his way of expressing himself. Part of his excitability had to be that he took in so much information but had limited ways to let us know. Assessing Peter with one minute read like other kids had been asked to do for district requirements and screenings was not applicable. Still, I needed a way to see if he was improving. To determine if we were making progress, we looked at how many sight words he knew. To see if his reading was getting more complex, I gave him unseen texts and listened to him read. Peter couldn't say words clearly so sometimes the s at the end of a word was left off and words were partially said, but this was what Peter *could* do. This is the way we worked.

Fast forward twelve years and Peter has graduated from high school and is now going to be looking for jobs he can do. His amazing mother, Brandy is his biggest advocate and searches for the best programs for Peter. Recently she told me that Peter often knows how to spell words that are difficult for their sixth-grade son. How do we know that Peter can spell? He writes it down. Writing is one way he can communicate best. Brandy tells me that he texts and searches for things on his iPad that he is curious about. She also says that they still read together. Peter reads all the time. Last year he read *The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe*. Peter reads to Brandy and when he gets tired she reads to him.

What about teaching a visually impaired child how to read? I am fortunate enough to have had that experience as well. This boy was totally blind. Since I don't know his whereabouts, I cannot contact him to see if I can use his name in this letter. For his confidentiality, I won't use his name. I knew the team would have to approach teaching him in a different way, but keep many of the same treatments as everyone else. When people learn braille, it has many contractions. This is like our contractions for can't and don't except that they are for many other words. Shirley Harris was our special education expert who helped the team with materials and taught the aide how to braille. She came to Salcha once or twice a week to check in on the progress and help us trouble shoot what to do to give this amazing child the best possible education we could. Again, the boy had a one-on-one aide. He had to learn everything a different, yet similar way. We did decide to teach this boy sounds like the other children and then when he had an understanding, to help him learn the braille contraction. This boy taught me so much about how to explain things so that all learners would understand. When I read a book about whales, he got to hold a high-quality toy so that words like flukes and blow holes could be explained to him. When kids went up to charts to read poems, this boy would come too because we would put brailled words under the visual words so that we could see him print match and read like his peers. His books were brailled. His worksheets were brailled. And he had to learn to write in braille. He was taught like any other kid. Again, assessing him had to be different because he couldn't read as fast as the other children in the room. We were not as concerned with his fluency, but more with the complicated nature of getting information off the page by touch. The last I heard, he graduated high school and is attending college. What a success he has been.

Why tell you stories about these amazing children? Because teachers need to find ways to teach all children. Not every child comes into the world of literacy the same way. It is important though to believe that all kids can read, and it is our job to figure out what needs to be done. One thing you will notice is that these two boys would not have learned to read without support staff. It was and is so critical. Over the years schools have had their budgets cut and these crucial people have been cut. Having a reading teacher in the school would help ease some of this burden but I argue that an aide in the classroom during other times is also critical. Hard to teach children need an adult side-by-side to help them focus, help them solve their math problems and help challenging learners read and write. My thirty years of experience tells me that the hardest children do not want to look at words because it's hard. Independent reading comes later for these children.

What I hope you also picked up on was that each child has been approached differently. The needs were different and so it is the teacher who must adjust. It is the teacher who draws on their depth of knowledge to find a way to teach these students.

How did I arrive where I am? I have been a student of professional development my whole thirty-year career. I received a Master of Education degree with a reading endorsement after teaching about ten years. I have continued to belong to professional groups and read professional books. I am fortunate that my passion is my life's work.

There is no magic bullet when teaching children to read. There is no single pathway. I am confident that if Peter was given a test that measures his speed in reading, he would have failed. He was not a typical student, yet the expectations of teaching him to read were high. I have had children come to my school that reported their previous school said their

student can't learn or won't learn higher than a certain level. I am always shocked at this because we have no idea how high children can go if we give them everything we can. What needs to be done in Alaska?

Prekindergarten is a start. Reading teachers in schools is another good start. I would urge you to help teachers learn deeply about how to teach reading. I'd urge you to have teachers study developmental levels of what kids can do. I'd love to have teachers understand what a running record of a child reading can tell you about what a child knows at this point in their reading. I'd also like to see the state be able to use running records on an unknown text carry as much weight as a computer test. Reading is complex. Young readers are just as complex. It's our job to figure all of that out.

What ways should we be teaching teachers? Linda Darling-Hammond looked at this issue in the report for the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (1994) <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED415183.pdf>. She correlated scores on tests with what teachers did in the classroom. See Table 1. I know this report is old, but it has not been replicated since. The results paint a picture that might be counterintuitive to the novice teacher but what decades of teaching has taught me is that children need to read real texts and write about them if we want achievement to be high. Notice from Table 1 where teachers can get the most gains. It's not from using lots of multiple-choice tests. If you teach multiple choice questions over and over, kids really don't do better. If you teach children to read and write, they do. Also, note in this report that many of the same struggles are still with us in Alaska today. States that took advantage of the National Writing Project helped teachers gain the in-depth knowledge that it takes to teach children to write. Sadly, NWP has shrunk in its size in Alaska and it is not at every UA campus. One way to strengthen SB6 would be to add a writing component and make sure NWP is available to all teachers across the state.

I urge you to continue to find ways which tell us that all children are learning, invest in quality professional development, provide aides within the classroom and helping our youngest children learn to read. Teachers need the flexibility to be able to make the professional decisions needed to help each child. A single program doesn't do all for all children. I'm always available for clarification or more information. Thank you.

Yours in literacy,
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Sent from [Mail](#) for Windows 10