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Gov. Bryant shares own story of struggles with dyslexia

Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant signed a bill Wednesday that requires kindergartners or first-graders to be tested for dyslexia, a reading disorder that can sometimes go undiagnosed for years and leave children struggling to learn.

The matter is intensely personal for Bryant. He was in fourth grade before a caring teacher discovered that dyslexia was the reason he saw scrambled words and had trouble putting the right sounds with letters that appeared in print.

"I repeated the third grade. What a difficult, horrible experience that was for a young child," Bryant, 57, recalled during a bill signing ceremony in his Capitol office.

On display was a small framed photograph of Josephine Henley, the fourth-grade teacher who helped him at south Jackson's Marshall Elementary School.

"Mrs. Henley ... was kind enough and had the wonderful heart of a teacher to explain to me that I was not dumb, that I simply had a challenge seeing the words," he said.

Henley's daughter sent Bryant the photo after the governor mentioned her mother

during his State of the State address in January.

After Bryant signed the dyslexia bills, he chatted with students invited to attend the ceremony. The students nodded as the governor recalled some of his own childhood frustrations.

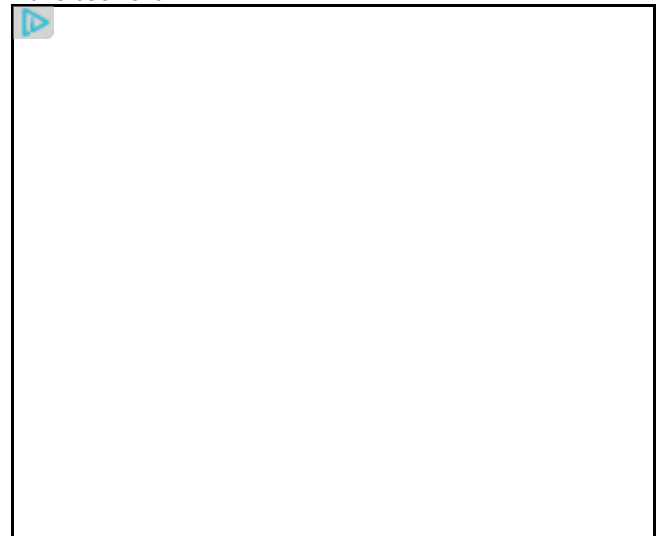
"You're always the first one to sit down at the spelling bee," Bryant said.

Stephanie Powell teaches dyslexic students at Canton Academy and hopes to earn a master's degree in dyslexia therapy. She said by the time many children are diagnosed, "they want to quit."

"They have a wall built up," Powell said. "And teachers for the most part don't understand what dyslexia is. There's a lot more to it than just making their B's and their D's backward. It's hard to figure out what that is. It's different for different children."

Bryant said dyslexic students who don't

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receive help are more likely to drop out of school.

"It can be treated. You can overcome this," he said. "And one of my great joys and passions today is reading."

Bryant went on to earn three college degrees and, he joked, has had "some limited success in public life."

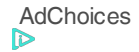
"We are going to give thousands of children the opportunity to know that they can learn, they can read, they can be successful, and, if they want to, one day, they can be governor," he said.

Gov. Phil Bryant on Wednesday signed the following bills:

- House Bill 1031, which requires early dyslexia screening, gives dyslexic students in first through sixth grades the ability to move to a new public or nonpublic school.
- House Bill 1032, which creates a college scholarship program for people who want to study dyslexia therapy.
- Senate Bill 2776, which creates a ratings system that gives each school and school district a letter grade like a report card: A, B, C, D or F.
- Senate Bill 2461, which allows any honorably discharged veteran to have a driver's license marked with a tiny American flag and the word VET.

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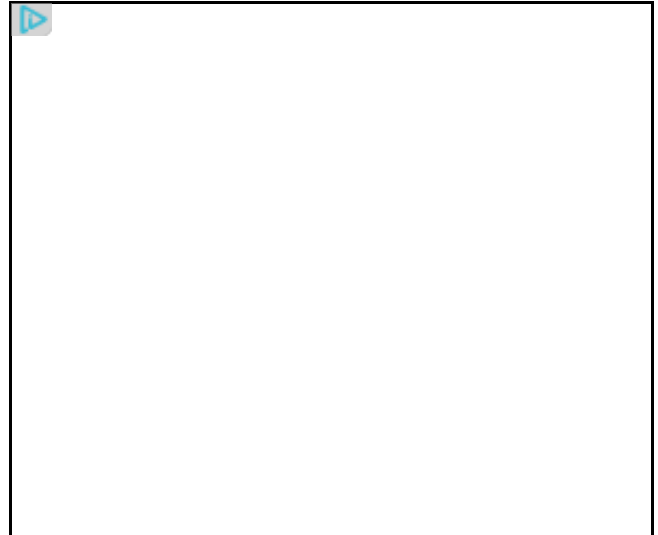
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