Katherine Davis Murfree

Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies

by Diane J. Sawyer

The Katherine Davis Murfree Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies was established in 1988. Katherine Davis Murfree, a Murfreesboro resident, saw that children with dyslexia were not adequately served in Tennessee schools. The syndrome of dyslexia, which affects about 10 percent of the population, was not well understood, and teachers were not trained to provide the special educational interventions these students need to support school success. She believed that something could be done to change the status quo and resolved to be an agent for change.

Murfree learned of the Chairs of Excellence partnership challenge the Tennessee General Assembly had instituted in 1984. She responded to that challenge and in collaboration with the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at MTSU funded the endowment for the Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies, dedicated to:

- informing the public about dyslexia;
- enhancing the skills of educators to identify and assist students with dyslexia; and
- contributing to the research base regarding causes and effective educational interventions.

A national search was launched in 1989 to select the first holder of this chair. Dr. Diane J. Sawyer was invited to fill the position and officially joined the faculty in January 1990.

Sawyer came to the Murfree Chair of Excellence from Syracuse University in New York, where she held the rank of professor in the Reading and Language Arts Department in the School of Education. Sawyer earned a Ph.D. from Cornell University with concentrations in psycholinguistics and child development. She has written numerous articles and book chapters on reading instruction, reading difficulties, and the language base of reading difficulty. She is a fellow of the International Academy of Research in Learning Disabilities.

Within weeks of arriving at MTSU, Sawyer was invited to give testimony about dyslexia before the Tennessee Senate Committee on Education. The following year, the General Assembly passed Resolution 128, which directed the state Board of Education to appoint a task force to study the effects of dyslexia on the academic performance of K–12 students. A principal recommendation of this task force was to provide professional development programs to equip pre-K and K–12 teachers with strategies to address the problem of dyslexia and assessment tools to distinguish dyslexia as a specific type of reading disability.

In an attempt to effectively address the problem of dyslexia in Tennessee schools, Sawyer proposed that the General Assembly provide financial support to establish the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia. In June 1993, the Tennessee General Assembly voted funds to establish such a center, and the center opened in October 1993. In December of that year, the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) voted to recommend establishment of this center as a permanent education service unit to operate under the authority of TBR. This recommendation was approved by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission in January 1994. Funding continues to flow to the center through the state budgetary process. The Murfree Chair of Excellence has oversight responsibility for its operation. Dr. Sawyer serves as the center’s director.

The center is the service arm of the Murfree Chair of Excellence. Center staff provide diagnostic services for children, staff development for pre-K–12 educators, and consultation services for educators and parents as schools increasingly take on responsibility to identify and adjust educational programming for students with dyslexia. The center also provides training for all MTSU school psychology students as well as opportunities for research by

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More than 600 children have received diagnostic assessments in the center, and more than 6,000 educators have attended professional development workshops offered at locations across the state.

In 1999, MTSU partnered with the Christy-Houston Foundation to fund construction of a $1.5 million dedicated facility to support the center’s services. This opened in December 2001.

The Murfree Chair of Excellence seeks to influence education for students with dyslexia at the macro level. Sawyer has served on state committees to develop new Tennessee reading standards and to design and develop training for faculty in at-risk schools who received funding through the Reading Excellence Act grant to the state. She collaborated in the design of regional literacy centers proposed by the state Board of Education. Sawyer’s research addresses the biological basis of dyslexia as well as the application of converging research to the development of tools for early identification. Her analysis of reading and spelling errors observed among center clients serves to clarify and describe the link between language deficits and literacy issues and informs both diagnosis and intervention practices. To formalize and integrate the professional development of Tennessee educators as they address the syndrome of dyslexia, a graduate certificate in dyslexic studies was proposed in 2002. In spring 2003, TBR approved implementation of the 18 credit-hour program. In 2004, selected courses will become available online to meet the needs of educators who cannot easily commute to Murfreesboro. This will be supported by a recent grant of $100,000 from the U.S. Department of Education.

The collaborative efforts that have followed from sponsorship of the Katherine Davis Murfree Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies have resulted in a statewide, systematic approach to this high-incidence learning disability that is unparalleled. The influence of this Chair of Excellence is substantial and highly regarded throughout the pre-K–12 education system in Tennessee. Research and publications have established its presence in the professional community in the United States and abroad.

Diane J. Sawyer holds the Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies and serves as director of the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia.