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How to support students
with dyslexia

nwea

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According to the [International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\)](#), about 15–20% of people in the US have some characteristics of dyslexia, like trouble with accurate reading, fluent word recognition, spelling, or decoding. And about 85% of K–12 students with a learning disability face difficulty with reading and processing language.

Learn more about how dyslexia may affect your students and how screening, combined with best practices in reading instruction, can foster confidence and academic growth.



Fact or fiction? The 4 myths of dyslexia

Elizabeth Barker

Dyslexia doesn't usually look how we think it will. Consider third-grader Judy, a dedicated student who finds herself in the middle of one of her most dreaded activities: a class read aloud.

As her knee bobs up and down—her body's way of channeling the fear of being called on—she scans the pages before her to make sure she knows how to say all the words in each paragraph. Judy's not paying attention to anything the other kids are reading aloud. She's anxious and nervous, fiercely scouring the paragraphs ahead.

She spots the problems: paragraph five has four words she can't pronounce, and paragraph three has two. Quickly she weighs her options. She can either volunteer to read paragraph three and deal with the two unknown words, or she can wait until later and perhaps not have to read at all. She thinks, "Maybe these words will be read by another student before I have to read. Then I'll know how to say them." She looks ahead, but no. Thinking again, she remembers science is later in the day and that really hard words come up in science.

Judy's heart pounds and her hands sweat. The class arrives at paragraph three, so she quickly raises her hand and hopes no one beats her to it. She's sure she'd rather do her time now. But she doesn't pay attention to what she's reading, only anticipates what will happen when she arrives at the first word she doesn't know, "chaos." Suddenly, it's right there on the page. She tries to sound it out.

“/K/ /k/...No. /Ch/ /ch/ /ch/...”

“‘Chaos.’ That’s a hard one,” her teacher interrupts.

Judy’s relieved to hear that, especially because the word is so small. She comes to the second unknown word, “parachute.” She pauses, waiting, not even trying to sound it out and hoping her teacher will just give it to her.

“Judy, try sounding this one out,” her teacher says instead.

“/P/ /p/ /pa/ /pa/...” she stumbles, thinking, “What does a say? Does it sound like /u/ or /o/?” Her knee bobs faster, and she regrets volunteering.

“Parachute!” her teacher finally frees her. Judy reaches paragraph four and another volunteer takes over. Relief sets in. With no time to recover from her anxiety, she refocuses her attention and is able to get the gist of the story.

The building blocks of reading

For students with dyslexia, like Judy, learning to read is a tremendous effort blocked by many hurdles and barriers: inappropriate instruction, misunderstood needs, and detrimental assumptions.

[Learning to read](#) requires that students first understand letters and the connection of letters to sound, then the sequence of sounds needed to create words, and, finally, how words connect to create sentences,

For students with dyslexia [...] learning to read is a tremendous effort blocked by many hurdles and barriers: inappropriate instruction, misunderstood needs, and detrimental assumptions.



paragraphs, and texts. After all these foundational steps are mastered, children can read to comprehend. As we see in the story about Judy, her struggle to decode unknown words hinders her ability to focus on the information in the text and pulls her attention away from the purpose of reading: to understand. While most kids will likely get nervous about having to read out loud, and while many will struggle with difficult words, the challenge for children without dyslexia is much more manageable. And it won't interfere so greatly with their ability to hold onto the thread of a text and read for comprehension. We want all students to have the ability to go deep in reading and make connections: text to text, text to self, and text to the world and to others.

Understanding dyslexia

It is tricky to understand what dyslexia is and isn't. Let's start by looking at the definition from the [International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\)](#) that is used by many: "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

Researchers have discovered one of the root causes of dyslexia lies within a component of language: the phonological module, or the part of language that requires the use and assembly of phonemes. [Phonemes are a single unit of sound](#). For example, the word "cat" contains three phonemes: /c/ /a/ /t/. In speech, we hear "cat" as a whole. The process of assigning those individual units of sound to a letter, and then recording those sounds and letters, is a critical and difficult step for a student with dyslexia. As letter/sound symbol patterns, or orthography, get more complicated, a child with dyslexia struggles further.

Compounding the obstacles dyslexia presents a child are misunderstandings about exactly what it is, due, in part, to scientists' evolving understanding of it. These misunderstandings often lead to incorrect assumptions and inappropriate instruction. Here are the four biggest myths about dyslexia, debunked.

Myth #1: Students with dyslexia read and write letters and numbers backward.

Fact: Backwards writing and reading and reversals of letters and words are all common in early stages of writing and reading among dyslexic and non-dyslexic students alike. Dyslexic students may have problems sequencing letters based on sound so they may try to write or read based on memory. Additionally, dyslexic students may have trouble remembering and quickly accessing words, letter names, and sounds but not necessarily copying them.

Myth #2: Reading and writing are indicators of intelligence, so if someone doesn't read or write well, they are not very smart.

Fact: [There is no relationship between intelligence and the struggle to read due to dyslexia.](#) (As an example, consider Judy's calculated decision-making during her class read-aloud exercise.)

Myth #3: Only school-aged children develop dyslexia.

Fact: People are born with dyslexia, so it's not something that develops or that a child can be at risk of developing. Diagnosis typically occurs when students begin to struggle with learning to read, spell, and write in school, hence the common association with school-age children.

Myth #4: Dyslexia is rare.

Fact: [Research has shown that dyslexia is common](#), affecting 20% of the population in the US and 80-90% of all Americans with a learning disability.

Probable signs of dyslexia

Even though the myths mentioned here still linger, we do know there are clear signs and characteristics of dyslexia that are based in research. According to the [Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity](#), here are some of the possible indicators for dyslexia.

Preschool years

- Trouble recognizing rhyming patterns orally, such as “cat, bat, rat”
- Difficulty learning and remembering names of letters
- Struggles recognizing letters in their own name
- A family history of reading and/or spelling difficulties

Kindergarten, first, and second grade

- Struggles associating letters with sounds, such as b with /b/
- Difficulty sounding out decodable consonant-vowel-consonant words, such as “cat,” “hit,” and “mop”
- Trouble understanding that words can come apart into individual sounds, like c-a-t
- Obstacles breaking words verbally into syllables, such as base-ball


Third grade through high school

- Very slow acquisition of reading skills
- Struggles to decode unknown words; replacement of unknown words with something phonetically or semantically similar
- Dislike of reading and discomfort reading aloud
- Limited short-term memory
- Extreme difficulty learning a foreign language
- Poor spelling
- Struggles with writing
- Low self-esteem

Building a love of reading

While a student may struggle with reading, writing, and spelling, they have, as Maryanne Wolf would say, a beautiful brain. This is an important reminder about students with dyslexia. Throughout history we see reference to many well-known artists, mathematicians, and scientists, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Albert Einstein, who were known to struggle. Today nearly 35% of entrepreneurs are known to be dyslexic.

As educators, we know the value of understanding how students' brains work to provide the right insight for instruction. Demystifying dyslexia is an important place to start. **TLG**



Why students with dyslexia aren't “at risk”

Elizabeth Barker

My mom had an in-home daycare when I was five years old. She read lots of books to me—I was surrounded by books—and every night my mom would read to me and my twin brother from a book of nursery rhymes and poems. [“The Sugar-Plum Tree”](#) by Eugene Field was our favorite. “Have you ever heard of the Sugar-Plum Tree? / 'Tis a marvel of great renown! / It blooms on the shore of the Lollypop sea / In the garden of Shut-Eye Town.”

I dreamed of that garden in Shut-Eye Town. And, like most kids, I dreamed of being able to read and write. Unfortunately, kindergarten came and went and, unlike my brother, I was not reading. Heck, I still had to work on my kindergarten letter books over the summer before first grade.

My story of learning to read is painful, just like the stories of other kids who struggled with reading, and it's a hurt that I carried with me long after kindergarten. As I got older and studied to become a teacher, for example, quotes about the beauty of reading, the sanctuary of reading, and how intelligence is built on the number of books you read made my stomach turn. I didn't need any reminders that, for me, reading and writing were always a chore. The insult that I wasn't intelligent as a result was the cherry on top.

I am very fortunate. Because of the support of many teachers and my family, I've built a career on understanding learning disabilities. My studies and professional experience have allowed me to make peace with who I

was—and am. I'd like to share some of what I've learned with you. If you have dyslexia, I hope it will bring you some comfort. If you are an educator, I hope it will guide you as you work with students of all ages who struggle to read.

Our changing understanding of dyslexia

As of 2024, every state education agency except Hawaii and Puerto Rico has adopted dyslexia legislation. While that's terrific news—and an important step forward—the fact that I still regularly need to dispel the outdated notion that students can somehow “get” dyslexia is frustrating. Students may show signs of dyslexia or they may have characteristics of it, but students are not “at risk” of getting or developing dyslexia. We often talk about kids who are “at risk,” as though they could catch dyslexia the way they might catch a cold after a friend sneezes nearby. This is not the case.

We've known dyslexia is a hereditary trait for more than a century. In fact, in 1905, the British physician C. J. Thomas, among others, presented this idea in his article “Congenital ‘word-blindness’ and its treatment.” He was followed by James Hinshelwood, who authored articles in *British Medical Journal* soon after. Numerous literature reviews noting these seminal works abound, including Bruce Pennington's [“Using genetics to understand dyslexia”](#) from *Annals of Dyslexia* in 1989.

Dyslexia itself can be traced as far back as the 1600s, and our understanding of it has evolved since then. [According to Peggy Anderson and Regine Meier-Hedde](#), the earliest known reading issue was recorded in 1676 when a Prussian physician described a patient who lost the ability to read due to a stroke. Over the next 200 years, the bulk of brain research was focused on aphasia, not on trouble with reading, and it wasn't until 1877 that terms like “word blindness” were used by [Adolph Kussmaul](#) to refer to patients who could not read in spite of average intelligence.

Kussmaul's research made reading problems a legitimate field of study and paved the way for [Rudolf Berlin](#), an ophthalmologist, to make his contribution. In his work, Berlin observed difficulties some of his adult patients had with reading. Berlin found no problems with their vision and coined their condition “dyslexia,” a word [derived from the Greek](#) that means “difficulty with words.”

Kussmaul and Berlin are well known for giving us some of the basic terminology we use to talk about dyslexia, but [it was James Hinshelwood, James Kerr, and William Pringle Morgan who first studied children](#) and removed previous notions that dyslexia was caused by

brain trauma or neglect. Then, in 1925, neuropathologist [Samuel Orton](#) presented his first paper on word blindness. Orton was one of the first researchers to advocate phonics instruction for those with dyslexia, an approach that is still highly recommended. In 1949 the [Orton Society](#) was created, and it continues as the [International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\)](#) today.

[D]yslexia can't be avoided, and dyslexia doesn't go away.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we saw cutting-edge research from [Sally Shaywitz](#), a physician-scientist with Yale University I like to refer to as the Godmother of Dyslexia. She and her colleagues have used functional MRIs to conduct [research on students struggling to read](#). This method provides a non-invasive way to study the reading brain across languages and cultures. The research explored the ability to connect sound to symbols.

We have made substantial gains in our knowledge around dyslexia thanks to researchers such as Shaywitz, gains that, in turn, lead us to pose more questions. Shaywitz is continuing to study dyslexia, as is [Maryanne Wolf](#), director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at




UCLA, and our understanding will continue to evolve in the future.

The damage inaccurate language can cause

My experience growing up and the work of countless researchers prove dyslexia is a hereditary condition, one students have absolutely no control over. Continuing to describe kids as being "at risk" for dyslexia is irresponsible, given everything we know. Why? It smacks of [ableism](#). "At risk" suggests that if kids (or their families) just made a bit more effort, dyslexia could be avoided altogether. But dyslexia can't be avoided, and dyslexia doesn't go away. By clinging to the erroneous label "at risk," we can fall into the trap [Dale DiLeo](#) calls "[benevolent ableism](#)." Let's use the phrases "characteristics of" or "signs of" dyslexia instead.

The reality with dyslexia is this: You can support a student with good instruction so that their struggle to read and write won't be as painful. But reading and writing will always be a challenge for them. Accepting this is critical to helping them learn and grow.

We're at an encouraging point in the history of dyslexia. Let's make sure we keep moving in the right direction, otherwise the only thing students with dyslexia will be "at risk" of is struggling in school if they don't receive the support they need to succeed. **TLG**



The case for K–3 screening and intervention for dyslexia

Elizabeth Barker

I vividly remember the first student I worked with at my first job as a special education teacher. Jacob was a sixth-grader, and the road to his dyslexia diagnosis was a long one.

Despite having reading difficulties for years, he had never been tested for a learning disability. In sixth grade, it was finally discovered he had a specific learning disability, or SLD, the most detailed diagnosis available at the time. His mom was relieved to finally have a name to put to her son's struggles. As early as first grade, she had known he was having a hard time. She'd even arranged some tutoring for him over the summer before second grade, and though he showed some improvement, it wasn't what everyone had hoped for. A little extra help and a bit more effort would do the trick, everyone had agreed. But because no one really understood the cause of Jacob's difficulties—including his tutor—it had been impossible to give him the support he needed to grow as a reader.

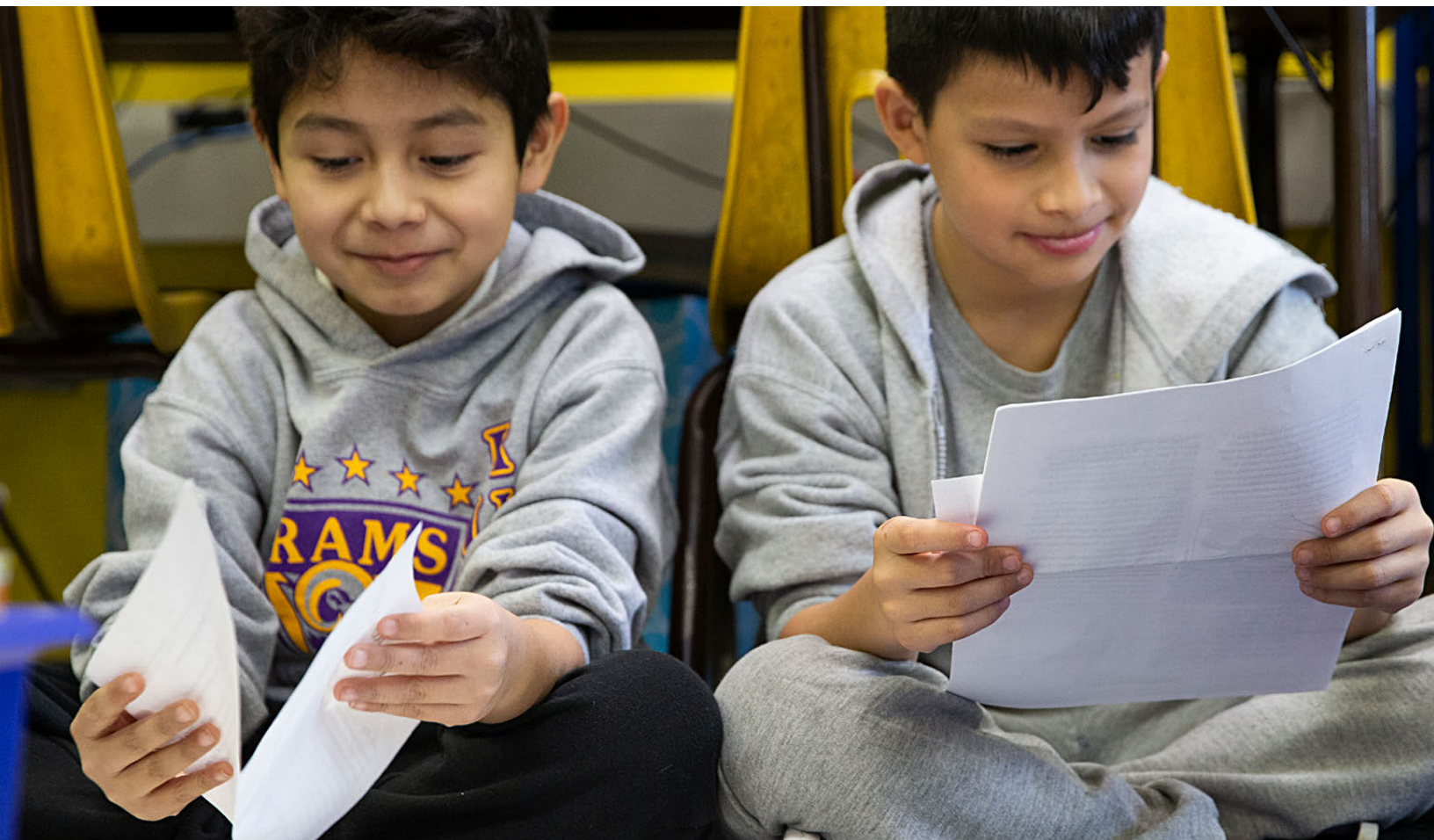
My story is similar to Jacob's. I was in sixth grade when I was tested for a learning disability, too. My parents had attended a seminar that my school held about struggling readers. They had me tested and, after my diagnosis of dyslexia, put me into a tutoring program that specialized in learning

disabilities. Their efforts made an impact. The experience of my diagnosis and specialized tutoring had a huge effect on rebuilding my confidence.

The importance of early screening—for all kids

My story and Jacob's story are not that unusual. Countless kids struggle with reading because of dyslexia and slide under the radar, not receiving a diagnosis and adequate support until very late in their school years, if at all. Sixth grade is a long time to wait to unmask a student's dyslexia. By then, they've lost many years and opportunities for teachers to intervene the most effectively. Phonics lessons aren't readily available in a sixth-grade classroom, either. This is why [research shows](#) that identifying kids with a learning disability, including dyslexia, at an early age is so important.

Screening all children is equally important. In many schools, we screen kindergarteners for vision and hearing. If a student does not pass their screening, the school recommends that they see a doctor for further testing. The beauty of vision and hearing screenings is that they're available to all students. Screenings for learning disabilities, on the other hand, are not. To even be recommended for a screening often means a child is likely attending school in a more affluent community. When I was growing up, I had so many resources available to me simply



because of the school I was able to go to. But my story is far different from the experiences of many students who go unidentified. Screening all children early would allow teachers to identify students who may need further evaluation for dyslexia and who could benefit from a change of instruction.

Identifying students as having signs of dyslexia at an early age is a step in the right direction.

Screening is the first step

In 2016, the [Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act \(READ\)](#) became law. The READ Act secured at least \$2.5 million annually for the National Science Foundation to research dyslexia, including methods for identifying students with dyslexia early. This pushed screeners forward, but there is still work to be done.


According to the [National Center on Improving Literacy \(NCIL\)](#), every state education agency except Hawaii and Puerto Rico has adopted dyslexia legislation. Most have screening policies in place, and some go so far as requiring intervention. But beyond the READ Act, there is nothing in place at the federal level that addresses dyslexia. I recommend that educators and families become familiar with their state's dyslexia policy and, if available, their intervention plan. NCIL's website will let you see all the information that's publicly available; just click on your state in their [map of dyslexia legislation](#) for more information. Every state that requires a dyslexia screener has their own criteria, from how many times a student is screened to what skills are included in the screener, so it's important to know what applies where you live.

Many states that are now passing legislation for dyslexia screeners are facing another challenge: how to move beyond just completing an initial screening to giving a student a formal diagnosis and appropriate intervention. For many years, schools and districts were told not to diagnose students with dyslexia, and under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), special educators and school psychologists could only say a student had an SLD, as was the case with Jacob. Even though the [IDEA definition for SLD](#) includes dyslexia, actually having that diagnosis on a child's individualized education plan (IEP) was typically not allowed. We find ourselves in a transition as a nation, with the process of actually diagnosing students with dyslexia still fuzzy overall and even fuzzier from state to state. This can pose an especially big problem for students who are diagnosed in one state and move to another, where legislation is different.

Lasting change can start in your school or district

State and federal legislation can take a long time to catch up to the real needs of children in classrooms across the country. One thing we can likely all agree on is that we don't want any students feeling like they're failing. When students give their all, like Jacob did, it's our job as adults to give them our all back. We must ensure we know enough about who they are and how they learn to provide the instruction and support they need to grow.

Identifying students as having signs of dyslexia at an early age is a step in the right direction. But we cannot stop here. We have a long way to go to ensure students across the country receive equal access to screening, diagnosis, and effective interventions. Regardless of what your state legislature mandates, I encourage your school or district to do what it can to address the needs of students with dyslexia. **TLG**



5 things to know about the new MAP Reading Fluency Dyslexia Screener

Kristie Werner

Since 2018, [MAP® Reading Fluency™](#) has made it easier for teachers to understand their students' reading skills so they can spend more time teaching and less time testing. By assessing the critical components of early reading—oral reading fluency, literal comprehension, and foundational skills—it provides a more complete picture of a student's reading ability in 20 minutes or less. The automatic scoring and group administration (remote or in person) have saved teachers a ton of time, too. Together the robust data and extra time help teachers confidently plan instruction and support each student in their learning-to-read journey.

Beginning in fall 2021, educators will be able to do one more very important thing with MAP Reading Fluency: screen K-3 students for characteristics of dyslexia or other reading difficulties. Here are the five most important things you need to know about the new MAP Reading Fluency Dyslexia Screener.

1. Our new screener brings the best of MAP Reading Fluency to dyslexia screening

Built on the foundation of MAP Reading Fluency, the new dyslexia screener leverages the same innovative technology to keep saving teachers time with group administration, automatic scoring, and objective results in easy-to-read reports.

Following the screener's release in fall 2021, teachers will be able to use MAP Reading Fluency just as they always have: as a pre-K-5 early reading benchmark assessment and progress monitoring tool. And in contrast to other dyslexia screeners, which require 1:1 administration, educators will now have an option that can be used with an entire class at once.

2. The screener applies a predictive model to flag student results

The dyslexia screener reporting features a predictive flag to help educators quickly and clearly see students whose results suggest that follow-up is appropriate.

What does the flag mean, exactly? The screener uses several measures from the foundational skills domain to identify students whose results may indicate possible characteristics of dyslexia or other reading difficulties. The flag is based on a psychometrically backed predictive model and the



likelihood of later reading difficulties. It is not a diagnosis of dyslexia or of a reading disability.

For any flagged student, an educator with training in dyslexia can study the rapid automatized naming (RAN) data in conjunction with the foundational skills data from the screener to determine next steps.

3. Key data informs instruction

In addition to the predictive flag and RAN measure, teachers will also receive informative foundational skills reporting for each student assessed with the dyslexia screener test form. That means there is no need to double test for skill-level instructional planning.

The dyslexia screener reporting will highlight each student's [zone of proximal development \(ZPD\)](#) in the progression of phonological awareness skills, as well as phonics and word recognition skills. This will help teachers better understand what instructional support or interventions may be appropriate. Each student report will also link to resources from the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#) with activities tailored to their skill needs and ZPD.

4. The screener is a screener only, not a diagnostic tool

The MAP Reading Fluency Dyslexia Screener is just that, a screener. It is brief and universal, so it can be used for all students, and it is designed to identify students who may need follow-up, including possible evaluation with a diagnostic tool. A diagnostic tool provides a much deeper dive for the subset of students flagged as at risk for reading difficulty, and it focuses on the why and how of a student's struggles. For dyslexia in particular, screener follow-up processes, protocols, or next steps may look different from district to district and state to state.

Think of it this way: The dyslexia screener is akin to a vision screening, where a child is asked to read letters on a chart a few feet away. If they have trouble, they move on to more in-depth screening with an optometrist, who might determine their diagnosis is nearsightedness and prescribe glasses.


According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), about 15–20% of people in the US have some characteristics of dyslexia, like trouble with accurate reading, fluent word recognition, spelling, or decoding.

5. All MAP Reading Fluency partners will have access to the dyslexia screener beginning in fall 2021

The dyslexia screener represents a major expansion to MAP Reading Fluency and we are excited to include it for our partners at no additional charge. The new screener solution will be available to all partners as part of their MAP Reading Fluency license.

Learn more about meeting the needs of kids with dyslexia

According to the [International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\)](#), about 15–20% of people in the US have some characteristics of dyslexia, like trouble with accurate reading, fluent word recognition, spelling, or decoding. Reach out to your account manager to learn more about the MAP Reading Fluency Dyslexia Screener, or [contact us](#) for information about bringing MAP Reading Fluency on in your school or district. **TLG**



Best practices in reading instruction for students with dyslexia

Cindy Jiban

Advocates for students with dyslexia are finally gaining more attention, in both the media and legislation. Dyslexia, they note, is more prevalent than many realize, and students with dyslexia are too often experiencing reading instruction that just isn't working, as my colleague [Elizabeth Barker](#) noted in [a recent blog post](#).

So here's a critical question: How can we provide good reading instruction that better helps students with dyslexia?

Let's start by remembering that young students with dyslexia are learning in regular primary-grade classrooms, where the job of teaching kids to read is central. The job is not teaching only the kids who don't struggle; the job is teaching *all* kids to read, and that includes children with dyslexia. While many students with reading disabilities will need more instructional intensity, that baseline of class-wide instruction matters. Regular classrooms—tier 1, in the language of RTI or MTSS—need to provide effective, research-based reading instruction to all.

Class-wide instruction in learning to read

Eons ago, I was trained as a teacher in a joint elementary and special education teacher preparation program. As I moved from elementary education methods classes to one taught by a faculty member focused on learning disabilities, it was easy for me to see that two paradigms were at work. But how could there be two truths about what worked in teaching reading?

One beloved professor offered an insight that I hang onto to this day: for the most part, good teaching is good teaching. If something works with kids who struggle more to learn to read, it is likely to work with all students. If something *doesn't* work for the kids who struggle more, it's worth asking why it belongs in our whole-class instruction.

The [International Dyslexia Association \(IDA\)](#) has been clear on this front. They concisely lay out what [effective reading instruction for students with dyslexia](#) looks like. In their discussion of a best practice, they also note something worth reading twice: “This approach not only helps students with dyslexia, but there is substantial evidence that it is more effective for *all* readers.”

Two critical elements of effective reading instruction

When we want to review what's effective for all readers, we have several good places to turn. One is something our tax dollars built: the federally run clearinghouse dedicated to vetting and summarizing research on effective instructional practices. As it happens, one [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\) practice guide](#) details what we know about effective instruction in foundational reading skills in primary-grade classrooms.

Looking at the WWC practice guide and the IDA fact sheet on teaching students with dyslexia side by side is useful. There is huge overlap in their recommendations, with the two clear IDA emphases corresponding to the two WWC recommendations with strongest research evidence. IDA and WWC encourage us to focus on two critical elements:

Phonological awareness: Both documents note this is an essential early instructional focus. The sounds of spoken language are the focus here, with the smallest sound unit being the phoneme (like the “f” sound in “fish”). Learners need to be able to distinguish and segment just that “f” sound so that they know what this letter F we are teaching them is for.

Phonics and word decoding: Both the IDA and WWC also call out the fundamental importance of phonics instruction, where the patterns of letters that make sounds go beyond the single letter sound level. There's a "sh" sound in "fish," but there's also a pattern-following "sh" sound in "motion." The IDA and WWC point to phonics for teaching multisyllable words, including analysis of word parts, like prefixes and suffixes.

Teachers aren't prepared to teach *all* young readers

Unfortunately, phonological awareness and phonics and word decoding are getting short shrift in many elementary teacher preparation programs, despite ample research evidence of their value. That's not just my grumpy pessimism; that's the finding of the [National Council on Teacher Quality \(NCTQ\)'s 2020 report](#), which describes and rates US teacher preparation programs' early reading instruction. Using a science-of-reading framework, they review all courses and requirements against five research-based core components of good early literacy instruction. NCTQ found that both phonological awareness and phonics are left out of all coursework in far too many teacher training programs. In graduate level licensure programs, only 36% are training teachers in phonological awareness and only 49% are training in phonics. Undergraduate programs are doing better in the last several years, but they, too, are very weak in phonological awareness. Alternative training programs are doing a dismal job, with half earning an F in early reading instruction overall.

That sounds to many of us like a crisis. Those of us who can, need to be pulling on those more systemic teacher preparation levers. But in the meantime, what does this mean for a classroom teacher, whose leverage point is twenty-some actual little learners? It means this: second-guess that you were taught everything you should know. Keep learning all you can about phonological awareness and phonics, and make sure to focus on how to teach them well.

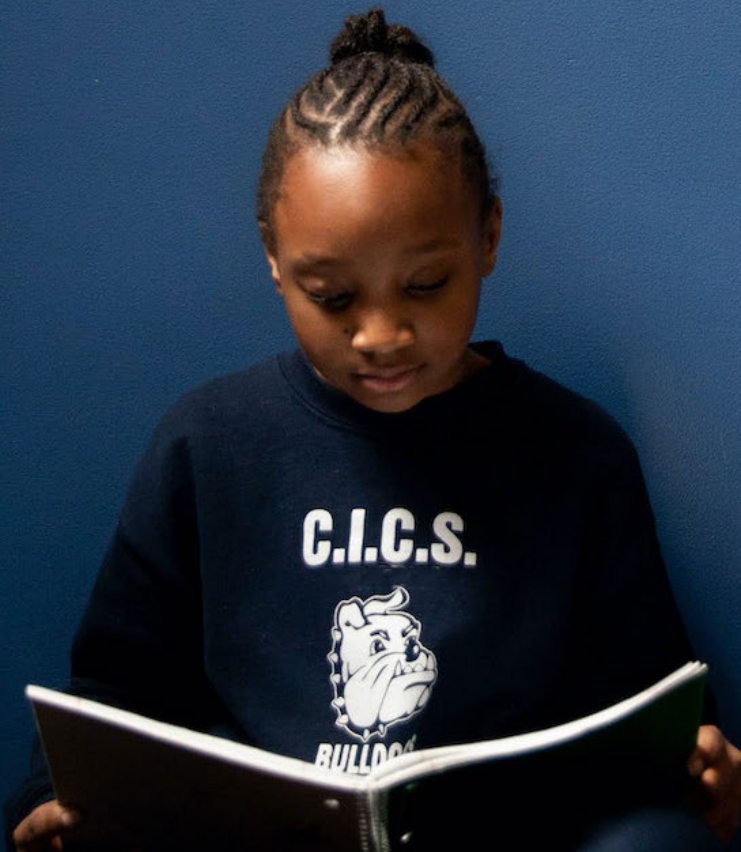
How to teach those critical elements

The IDA's research-based guidance goes beyond *what* to teach; it also includes *how* to teach. It offers three principles that benefit students with dyslexia: instruction should be systematic, explicit, and diagnostic. But remember, the IDA also asserts that much of this is effective for *all* students. Which parts? The effectiveness of two of these principles for all early readers becomes clear by looking to the foremost professional organization for literacy educators. In 2019, an [International Literacy Association \(ILA\) brief on phonics instruction](#) was crystal clear about its support for two key how-to-teach principles. While the ILA is writing about

class-wide instructional practices, their guidance echoes two of the IDA's recommendations on how teaching should look to best benefit students with dyslexia.

- **Systematic:** A planful sequence of phonics instruction deliberately moves through building-block skills with consonants, easy vowel sounds, harder spellings of vowel sounds, and word parts. This is the opposite of a fully incidental approach, where today's fun picture book might have some long vowel teams to talk about, or maybe a PH digraph (who can say, until we open it up?). That's not systematic; that's willy-nilly. Systematic instruction can still be full of fun and games, but it is about following a methodical sequence of decoding skills.
- **Explicit:** Instead of waiting for kids to discover patterns in words, explicit instruction includes directly stating patterns and rules and designing opportunities to try them. "The TION letters in this word work together to say SHUN," a teacher says and shows explicitly, following up with chances to read and build words containing the TION pattern of letters. Kids aren't left to discover these patterns on their own, which is very hard for some kids to do.

[S]econd-guess that you were taught everything you should know.



Why screening for dyslexia still matters—and what to do with results

If teaching phonological awareness and phonics in systematic and explicit ways benefits *all* students, not just those with dyslexia, why do we screen for dyslexia at all? Because while students with dyslexia benefit from what my professor called “good teaching,” they are also likely to need additional support.

When a student is flagged as possibly having characteristics of dyslexia, follow-up by schools and families should increase their communication and their collaboration. Next steps should be characterized by a push toward additional assessment, both informal and possibly more formal, and by more individualization of instruction based on those observations or data. Recall that the IDA guidance on how to teach includes a third principle, one not shared by guidance on what to do with all students. The final emphasis is more specific to students with dyslexia and other reading disabilities: our teaching should be diagnostic. That means informing instruction with ongoing skills diagnostics.

Our students need us

Fighting for research-backed reading instruction to become more pervasive is a good fight. Improving class-wide instruction in systematic and explicit phonics needs to happen. But even when it has, there will be students for whom this instruction will not be enough. While not all students with dyslexia will need specially designed instruction, ensuring the capacity to deliver that is our responsibility in protecting every student’s right to learn to read. **TLG**

About the authors



Elizabeth Barker

Elizabeth Barker, former research scientist at NWEA®, began her career in education as a middle school and elementary special education teacher, specifically of students with mild-to-moderate disabilities in Michigan and Colorado. She received her doctoral degree with an emphasis on growth trajectory for students with learning disabilities in mathematics and reading comprehension from the University of Oregon. Her current research focuses on how growth trajectories vary among students with visual impairments, deafness and hearing loss, and other disabilities.



Cindy Jiban

Cindy Jiban has taught in elementary and middle schools, both as a classroom teacher and as a special educator. She earned her PhD in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota, focusing on intervention and assessment for students acquiring foundational academic skills. After contributions at the Research Institute on Progress Monitoring, National Center on Educational Outcomes, and Minnesota Center for Reading Research, Cindy joined NWEA in 2009, where she served as principal academic lead until 2023.



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Kristie Werner is a former senior product marketing manager at NWEA. She brings a diverse background including 20+ years of marketing, customer support, and program management experience to her role at NWEA. Her passion for education and the organization's mission—Partnering to help all kids learn—attracted her to NWEA in 2015. Kristie completed her undergraduate work at Portland State University and an MBA at the University of Oregon.

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