

Addressing Dyslexia in Schools

Lessons Learned From Two Texas School Systems

In January 2018, SREB released its first-ever publication on dyslexia, *Dyslexia Policies in SREB States: Addressing the Needs of Struggling Readers*. This policy brief summarized the research on dyslexia — which impacts as many as one in five students — and urged states to improve teacher preparation and training to address dyslexia, make sure their schools screen students for dyslexia early, and promote the use of proven, evidence-based instruction and intervention strategies. Texas has required screening and intervention for students with dyslexia since 1985. But the true impact of state policies depends on their implementation at the district and school levels.

Many districts in Texas are still working to identify more students with dyslexia and improve the instruction and intervention they provide to these students. In April 2018, SREB spent time with district dyslexia leaders in two Texas school districts and asked them to share their experiences regarding changing dyslexia practices at the district level and in schools. The following is a summary of lessons learned and recommendations for other school districts across the region.

Dyslexia Policies in Texas

The Texas Education Code requires that all students enrolled in public schools in the state be tested for dyslexia “at appropriate times.” In 2017, the state passed a law to require screening at the end of kindergarten and at some point during first grade. Students with dyslexia must receive instruction from a teacher trained to use a multisensory structured language reading program, which the school district must purchase or develop. The state does not provide funds to support districts in implementing these policies. However, state law requires each regional education service center, or ESC, to employ a licensed dyslexia therapist to support local districts and train educators.

Districts in Texas have more readily available opportunities for dyslexia instruction and intervention training than do districts in many other states. These include Scottish Rite centers in every major city, the Neuhaus Education Center — a nonprofit organization devoted to evidence-based training and support for reading — and courses provided by the state’s ESCs. Some school districts use the Dyslexia Intervention Program developed by Texas’ ESC Region 4, which combines elements of multiple approaches to structured language instruction. Other districts choose to work with Scottish Rite, Neuhaus, or other organizations and use their programs and methods.

Preservice teachers in Texas must receive instruction in the detection and education of students with dyslexia, including proven multisensory strategies for teaching students with dyslexia. Training is not mandated for current teachers unless they “screen and treat” dyslexic students.

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Summary of Districts' Dyslexia Practices



Houston Independent School District (2017-18)

Student Enrollment: 214,175

Campuses: 159 elementary, 38 middle, 38 high, 41 other or combined

Budgeted spending per student: \$11,221

Students with dyslexia identified: 3,500 (1.6 percent of student body)

The Houston Independent School District was the seventh largest public school district in the nation in 2017-18. Services for students with dyslexia fall under the umbrella of Houston ISD's Interventions Office. Within this structure, two district staff lead the Dyslexia Program Support Services Office, which oversees seven regional dyslexia specialists who support schools directly. Every school in Houston ISD also has a staff member certified to evaluate students for dyslexia and provide intensive instruction using structured literacy program. Some of these staff are special education teachers or individuals tasked with overseeing students' individual accommodations plans — known as 504 plans for the federal law that requires them — while others are teachers certified in general education who have received extensive training.

Houston ISD chose to work with Houston-based Neuhaus Education Center to train regional and campus-based dyslexia specialists and interventionists. Some elementary schools in the district also work more directly with Neuhaus to try to prevent reading difficulties early by training classroom teachers to incorporate structured language teaching into their daily reading instruction. The district covers the cost of training for campus-based dyslexia interventionists. Schools that seek training for classroom teachers generally use Title I and special education funds to pay for programs and training.

Every young student in Houston ISD is screened three times each year in reading using a universal screener purchased by the district and provided to all schools. Students not meeting benchmarks on the screener are identified by teams of teachers during their "data talks" about student performance. These students are either provided with additional instructional support or, if the team suspects the students may have dyslexia, are referred for an evaluation by a district dyslexia specialist. Students who are identified as dyslexic receive intensive intervention instruction from the campus-based dyslexia interventionist using Neuhaus' Basic Language Skills program.

Houston ISD has a large population of students who are English Language Learners, or ELLs. The district uses a Spanish-language version of the universal screener for these students. Children with dyslexia whose primary language is Spanish are provided with intervention using Esperanza, a program for Spanish-speaking dyslexic children.

At secondary levels, schools must be creative to find time to provide intensive intervention for students with dyslexia. Some schools in Houston ISD provide intervention during a required reading and writing elective, which is credit-bearing at the high school level. Others use a before-school "power hour," early morning zero-period class, or time designated for an advisory period or study hall during the school day.



Lufkin Independent School District (2017-18)

Student Enrollment: 7,992

Campuses: 7 primary, 5 elementary, 4 secondary

Budgeted spending per student: \$9,211

Students with dyslexia identified: 344 (4.3 percent of student body)

Lufkin ISD, located in rural east Texas, is a relatively small district compared to its urban counterpart. The district dyslexia coordinator leads a team of 12 campus-based dyslexia specialists who are Certified Academic Language Practitioners or Certified Academic Language Therapists, all trained by Neuhaus Education Center. Though the district's current dyslexia coordinator has training from Neuhaus, Scottish Rite, and in the Orton Gillingham Approach, Lufkin ISD chose to work with Neuhaus due to its proximity.

Every language arts teacher in kindergarten through fifth grade in Lufkin ISD has received training from Neuhaus to ensure that all students receive high-quality instruction in foundational reading skills. The district applied for and received a grant from the local TLL Temple Foundation to cover training for its first ten campus-based dyslexia specialists. The district itself funded training for K-5 teachers and provides stipends to compensate dyslexia specialists for their extra responsibilities, which include dyslexia screening and intervention and participation in their schools' multitiered systems of support and leadership teams. The specialists and district coordinator also meet together on a monthly basis to discuss their current goals and challenges and develop plans to address them.

The district Dyslexia Coordinator is responsible for evaluating students who may have dyslexia after they have been identified through their school's universal screening process. Elementary students who struggle with reading receive extra instruction in a pull-out setting; those who continue to struggle are referred for a dyslexia evaluation. Students with dyslexia are generally identified during the second half of their first grade year. English Language Learners are typically identified during second grade. Students with dyslexia who need intervention in middle school receive it through a required elective. Students in high school generally only require accommodations that are provided through an individualized 504 plan, but intervention may be provided on an individual basis if needed.

Lufkin ISD provides a five- to six-week summer school program for students whose participation is recommended by their teachers. Struggling readers are provided with intensive intervention during this program by the district's dyslexia specialists, who are able to recognize students with characteristics of dyslexia who may have slipped through the cracks during the school year.

Lessons Learned

Representatives from both Texas school districts emphasized the importance of strong leadership when trying to enact change at the district level. District leaders first need to understand dyslexia and why intervention is important. In the beginning stages of a district dyslexia program, the district should create an interdepartmental stakeholder team composed of leaders who are in charge of curriculum, assessment, special education and district supervision of principals in order to build awareness and develop a plan for addressing dyslexia at both the campus and district levels. This team can then identify the number of students who may need intervention for dyslexia, explore training options, and develop a plan to fund and provide training to individuals who will become dyslexia specialists.

The individuals who become dyslexia specialists or interventionists need a particular set of skills to match their unique position. They need to be passionate, commit to stay in the district for at least a few years, and interact productively with many different groups of people, including students, parents, teachers, and school and district leaders. Finding people who will be a good fit for the position is critical to building internal capacity.

School leaders, like district leaders, need to be knowledgeable about dyslexia and reading instruction. They also need to know how to leverage different sources of funds — such as Title I and special education funds — to pay for teacher training and intervention for students with dyslexia.

As districts identify and serve more students with dyslexia, they will also be faced with the challenge of addressing growing needs. Researchers say that as many as 20 percent of students may be affected by dyslexia. Ensuring that all students in the earliest grades receive explicit, systematic, phonics-based instruction that provides a strong foundation in key early reading skills can help reduce the proportion of students who require intensive remediation later on. Districts should keep in mind that prevention and early intervention are much less costly than intervention after second or third grade — and more likely to be effective.

Essential Elements for addressing dyslexia in schools



Expectations

If it's not expected, it's less likely to happen



Leadership

A strong, knowledgeable leader needs to make the push



Resources

Leverage Title I and IDEA funds and seek out grants



Engagement

Create a team and make sure everyone's on board



Training

Educators need tools in their toolboxes



Support

Building internal capacity requires ongoing support

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- In-person site visit with staff in the Interventions Office at Houston Independent School District, including Dr. Courtney Busby, past Director of Interventions; Tammy Spencer, Senior Manager, Dyslexia; and Obed Franco, Compliance Team Lead, Dyslexia.
- In-person site visit with Alys Ray, District Dyslexia Coordinator, Lufkin Independent School District.