

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dyslexia Policies in SREB States

Researchers estimate that **dyslexia affects at least one in 10 people**. As defined by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), dyslexia is a neurobiological learning disability, unrelated to intelligence, characterized by differences in the way the brain processes language. These differences result in difficulties developing skills that are important for reading and writing. While it cannot be outgrown, individuals with dyslexia can learn strategies to help them overcome the unique challenges it presents.

Dyslexia is common, but few people who have it are identified.

Dyslexia often reveals itself first in elementary school, when children experience persistent difficulty with specific literacy skills. These might include learning letter-sound relationships, sounding out unfamiliar words, spelling or copying text. Young children with dyslexia may have delayed speech and struggle with language skills like rhyming before they even enter school. A number of websites, including that of the Dyslexia Resource Trust, provide more comprehensive lists of challenges common to individuals with dyslexia.



Despite its prevalence, the Dyslexia Research Institute estimates that **only one of every twenty people with dyslexia is identified**. The rest may never receive the specialized instruction that would help them become better readers and writers. Systematically identifying students with dyslexia and intervening early can make a difference for them and could raise the percentage of students who meet reading benchmarks. Noted researchers Shaywitz, Morris and Shaywitz

reported in 2008 that **providing appropriate reading instruction and intervention for children with dyslexia by second grade could reduce the percentage of students at risk for continuing reading difficulties to less than 5 percent**.

Schools must identify students with dyslexia early and use specialized instructional methods to help them.

Children with dyslexia often fall behind in literacy skills early in their school careers. Researchers have found **a clear achievement gap between typical readers and readers with dyslexia** as early as first grade. Identifying and supporting students with dyslexia as early as possible makes it more likely that they will be able to reach and sustain grade-level skills in reading. States are increasingly choosing to require screenings of literacy skills for all young students to ensure that no child falls through the cracks.

Because the brains of dyslexic individuals process language differently, teaching students with dyslexia to read requires specialized strategies. Teachers need to help students build the language skills non-dyslexic children typically acquire on their own. **Structured literacy** instruction explicitly and systematically teaches students the basic elements of language that are required for reading.

To read the complete SREB brief on state policies related to dyslexia, visit www.sreb.org/dyslexia. The main points of the brief are summarized here.

Mastery of these language skills is crucial for children with dyslexia, but research shows that structured literacy instruction can benefit other children, too. Structured **multisensory** methods, such as the Orton-Gillingham Approach, are particularly effective for individuals with dyslexia.

States can help ensure that children with dyslexia learn to read proficiently by considering the following policies:

- **Ensure that children with dyslexia are identified early and consistently in all schools.**

Several short screening assessments are effective for identifying skill gaps that are characteristic of dyslexia. Requiring local education agencies to use a particular screening instrument or choose from a few validated instruments can help ensure that students with dyslexia are identified consistently throughout the state.

- **Strengthen teacher training and certification requirements to emphasize scientifically-based reading instruction and equip teachers to recognize dyslexia.**

Teaching reading — to any student, at any level — requires expertise. The International Dyslexia Association’s *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading* emphasize the use of structured literacy strategies to teach the five essential components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel. The standards also specifically address dyslexia.

- **Promote the use of instruction and intervention methods that are effective for students with reading difficulties and ensure that teachers receive adequate training for implementing these strategies.**

To help provide guidance for educators, the International Dyslexia Association has compiled a *Matrix of Multisensory Structured Language Programs*, with information on proven approaches to teaching language and reading skills. Intensive, targeted intervention is also necessary for some students who experience significant reading difficulties. Providing local education agencies with information on ways they can access training on effective methods at a reasonable cost — or even designating existing intervention funds for training on a given approach — can help ensure that education dollars are spent on methods that work.

- **Encourage schools to make appropriate referrals for special education services for students with dyslexia.**

Students with more severe forms of dyslexia are likely to need reading and writing instruction in a small-group setting with specialized instruction and goals. Schools should not delay a referral for evaluation to determine whether students who do experience significant difficulties are eligible for special education services. It behooves states to identify these children as soon as possible: when students fall too far behind in the early grades, it becomes increasingly difficult and expensive to provide adequate remediation later.

If states can identify more students who face the challenges of dyslexia and provide effective early interventions, they should be able to reduce the proportion of students who perform below grade-level expectations. This in turn will ensure that a greater proportion of *all* students are prepared for success in fourth grade and beyond.

