# Executive Summary of the Georgia Dyslexia Pilot Program Implementation Analysis 2020–2021: Year 1 of Implementation

*Conducted by the RC6 at SERVE Center, SREB, and the GaDOE (Full report: region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/)*

In 2019 the Georgia Assembly passed Senate Bill 48 into law. The bill requires school districts to begin screening all kindergarten students and students in grades 1–3 who have been identified through the Response to Intervention process for characteristics of dyslexia beginning in 2024–25 (Georgia Code §20-2-159.6 or S.B. 48). To prepare for this statewide mandate in 2024–25, the bill also requires that the GaDOE conduct a three-year Dyslexia Pilot Program. For more information about S.B. 48, see the Georgia Department of Education Dyslexia webpage.

## Key Aspects of Pilot District Implementation in 2020–21

The following is a summary of information collected through virtual interviews conducted in June 2021 with pilot district leaders. Findings relate to the following four areas: implementation approaches, screening, instruction and intervention, and progress monitoring and data-based decision making.

### 1 District Implementation Approaches and Participating Schools

Districts shared that, overall, they were able to implement the pilot as planned, despite unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19. Districts chose to implement the pilot district-wide, start with three schools and expand later, or implement in one school for all three years. A total of 97 schools were involved in 2020–21 across the districts. Table 1 summarizes their approaches.

**Table 1. Pilot District Location and Student Enrollment in 2020–21**

| District | Location | Student Enrollment | Approach | #Schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Marietta City Schools** | Atlanta (Urban) | 8,523 | Start with 3 schools | 3 |
| **Jackson County Schools** | Near Athens (Non-Rural) | 8,675 | Start with 3 schools | 3 |
| **City Schools of Decatur** | Atlanta (Urban) | 5,658 | District-wide | 7 |
| **DeKalb County Schools** | Atlanta (Urban) | 92,353 | District-wide | 78 |
| **Muscogee County Schools** | Columbus (Non-Rural) | 30,514 | Start with 3 schools | 3 |
| **Ware County Schools** | South GA (Rural) | 6,041 | One school | 1 |
| **Charlton County Schools** | South GA (Rural) | 1,648 | District-wide | 2 |

#### *Factors Supporting Implementation in 2020–21*

Interviewees reported several factors that helped them implement the pilot in 2020–21:

- **District size and starting small:** Having fewer students to screen and fewer schools to manage, and starting on a small scale, helped some districts implement the pilot.
- **Technology expertise:** In some districts, staff's preexisting expertise with technology made it easier to adapt to COVID-related changes, like virtual screening and instruction.
- **Low staff turnover:** Less turnover reduced some districts' need to train new staff members.
- **Existing MTSS efforts:** Several districts said existing MTSS structures and processes helped them implement key aspects of the pilot. (Information about Georgia's Tiered System of Supports for Students, or MTSS, can be found here.)
- **Buy-in:** Buy-in from parents and the school community supported pilot work.
- **Project management:** One district described how its efforts to guide implementation of the pilot using a project management approach strengthened implementation.
- **Resources:** Districts leaned on the expertise of their own staff, contacts in other districts, and their GLRS and RESAs. They also used GaDOE's professional learning opportunities and Dyslexia Informational Handbook.

### *Factors Hindering Implementation in 2020–21*

Interviewees reported two dynamics that made implementation of the pilot in 2020–21 challenging:

- **Loss of student participation**: Due to the virtual learning required by COVID, one district reported that student participation in screening was down by more than 30% from the previous school year and English learners were hit particularly hard.
- **Staff turnover**: In one district, training new staff slowed pilot implementation.

## 2 Screening for Reading Difficulties and Characteristics of Dyslexia

All pilot districts reported conducting universal screening for K–3 students in 2020–21, as required by S.B. 48. Some districts also included Pre-K students, and four included students beyond the third grade. Other key aspects of screening efforts in 2020–21 are summarized below.

### *Screeners*

- **Tools**: There was little commonality in the screening tools the pilot districts used. A total of 23 different tools were used. It was common for districts to use more than one screening tool, and four districts said they used four or more.
- **Universal screeners**: Districts used a total of 13 tools. Only four universal screeners were used by more than one district: Acadience, MAP products, Star Early Literacy, and Star Reading.
- **Multistage screening**: In five districts, students who met certain criteria on the universal screener were further assessed using one of 10 different tools. None of these tools was used by more than one district.

### *Tool selection criteria*

- **Familiarity**: More than half of districts continued using screening tools they had in place.
- **Data**: Several districts looked for tools that provided detailed information about specific skills.
- **S.B. 48:** Two districts explicitly discussed taking into account the skill areas required by S.B. 48.
- **COVID-19**: The need for virtual learning and screening affected districts' choices.

### *Screening processes*

- **Timing**: All pilot districts conducted screening three times a year. Screening windows varied, e.g., three to four days per grade, and two or three weeks to complete an entire round.
- **Conducting screening**: Classroom teachers most commonly administered screeners, followed by school administrators, special education teachers, and school assessment teams.
- **Analyzing data**: Teachers and administrators most commonly analyzed data, followed by interventionists, EIP teachers, coaches, school psychologists, and a district team.

### *Identifying Students with Characteristics of Dyslexia*

Current GaDOE guidance does not specify cut scores or decision rules for identifying students for additional screening or as having characteristics of dyslexia. As such, each pilot district developed its own decision rules. Further information districts shared about this topic included the following.

- **Identification processes**:
  - In five districts, all students took a universal screening assessment, followed by more specific screening for certain students to identify weaknesses in specific skills that could indicate dyslexia. Thresholds for identifying students for further assessment varied: below the 15th percentile, the 20th percentile, or the 25th percentile; between the 20th and 40th percentiles; and below a

locally established risk score. These rules were often used in combination with teachers' observations and other classroom data.
  - One district used a single-stage screening process. This district conducted universal screening and set goals for students based on the screening data. Students who did not make adequate progress were referred for a special education eligibility evaluation.
  - One district conducted universal screening in 2020-21, but not dyslexia-specific screening.
- **Students identified**: Several districts shared information on this topic. One reported identifying more than twice as many students as in previous years; one identified more than half of the students receiving a second-level screener; and one reported that most of the identified students were already receiving intervention.

## 3 Reading Instruction and Intervention

Districts discussed several key aspects of instruction and intervention as related to the pilot.

### *Curricula*

Several district interviewees shared that participating in the pilot revealed to them the need to focus more on improving core reading instruction for all students. There was little commonality in the core reading curricula pilot districts used. They used a total of 12 different curricula, and only two—Wilson Fundations and Reading Wonders—were used by more than one district. A majority of districts used multiple curricula, reflecting the recognition that gaps in some curricula required supplementation.

### *Instruction*

Pilot districts reported a number of efforts underway to improve early reading instruction as important context for their Dyslexia Pilot work, as summarized below.

- **Professional learning**: Needed to improve core reading instruction.
- **Instructional materials**: Buying decodable texts to use in core instruction.
- **Hiring additional staff:** One district used CARES Act funds to hire staff to support the pilot.
- **Monitoring for fidelity**: Monitoring and supporting implementation of existing curricula.
- **Adjusting master schedules**: Required phonics instruction and made time for intervention.

### *Intervention for Students Who Need Additional Support*

- **General reading intervention**: There was little commonality in the interventions used. Districts used a total of 18 different interventions, and some districts used as many as seven. Only four interventions were used by more than one district.
- **Dyslexia-specific intervention**: Districts were exploring how to provide this type of intervention within the MTSS framework. Districts reported using five different interventions: Lexia Core5, MaxScholar, Mindplay, Wilson Read Live, and Orton-Gillingham strategies.
- **Intervention processes:**
  - Types: Districts implemented both face-to-face and virtual interventions.
  - Staffing: Classroom teachers were key in most districts. Other staff involved included EIP teachers, interventionists, paraprofessionals, and co-teachers. One district hired three support teachers with CARES Act funds. In another, district staff collaborated across offices on instructional walkthroughs.
  - Scheduling: One district planned to add time in the master schedule for intervention.
- **Tier 2 versus Tier 3 intervention:**
  - Tier placement: One district established cut scores. Students scoring between the 10$^{th}$ and 25$^{th}$ percentiles on the universal screener received Tier 2 support and students scoring in the bottom

10% received Tier 3 support (teacher judgement and classroom data were also considered). Another district applied score ranges set by the publisher of the universal screener to make placement decisions. In a third district, screening data and anecdotal information were used to decide on a case-by-case basis.

- Intervention delivery: Three interviewees said a change in intensity (group size, duration, frequency) elevated interventions from Tier 2 to Tier 3. Two interviewees said this distinction came from adding strategies or using an intervention differently. One interviewee said their Tier 2 used a push-in model and Tier 3 used a pull-out model.

### 4 Data-Based Decision Making and Progress Monitoring

The tools and processes districts used to monitor student progress and adjust intervention varied.

- **Tools**: Districts used a variety of tools, the majority of which were purchased from vendors.
  - A total of nine commercial progress monitoring products were named, and only one of those — Acadience— was used by more than one district.
  - A few districts also said they used locally created progress monitoring assessments.
- **Timing of Progress Monitoring**:
  - Progress monitoring frequencies districts reported varied from weekly to monthly, to as needed per student.
- **Staff Involved in Data Analysis:**
  - Staff most often involved: teachers and instructional or MTSS coaches
  - Team structure: 4 districts
  - District staff involved: 1 district

## Successes

Districts identified the following types of successes in the 2020–21 school year.

- **Increased capacity to implement the pilot and buy-in from staff and parents**: Reported by more than half of districts.
- **Pilot integrated well with existing MTSS efforts**: Reported by several districts.
- **Screening**: In three districts, screening went well despite COVID and provided helpful data.
- **Collaboration**: Several districts shared that multi-stage screening improved staff collaboration.

## Challenges

Districts also faced a variety of challenges in implementing the Dyslexia Pilot in 2020–21.

- **Virtual Learning Disruptions Resulting from COVID:** Nearly half of districts reported lower student participation, skewed screening data, and disconnects in communication and collaboration.
- **Staffing:** Four districts reported difficulties finding, training, and retaining knowledgeable staff.
- **Data-Based Decision Making:** Several districts struggled with identifying a need for further screening or evaluation; identifying characteristics of dyslexia, especially for English learners; and selecting interventions based on student outcomes.
- **Reading Instruction:** Two districts found that conflicting beliefs about how reading should be taught among school, district, and RESA staff made it difficult to agree on needed curriculum purchases and teacher training.
- **Family Engagement:** A perceived lack of parent support made it harder to engage students in one district, and children's lack of exposure to literacy prior to school entry increased the number of students who were flagged as "at risk" on screeners in another.
- **Intervention:** Finding time to provide intervention, doing intervention well, and starting needed intervention as quickly as possible were challenges cited by three districts.

## Support Needed from the GaDOE

Districts suggested a number of ways the GaDOE could continue to support their pilot efforts.


Districts wanted the state to provide information to and for parents, including:

- What dyslexia is
- How students with characteristics of dyslexia can be served in general education
- How schools identify students who do require special education services


Districts expressed a need for:

- Clearer state expectations for pilot implementation
- More guidance on selecting screening tools
- Decision rules for using screening data and identifying students with characteristics of dyslexia


Four districts stated that more funds for implementation of the pilot could be used to:

- Hire additional staff
- Pay for professional learning
- Make the dyslexia endorsement more affordable for teachers


Three districts wanted more opportunities to collaborate across pilot districts to:

- Share information about processes, tools, and experiences implementing the pilot
- Discuss and possibly seek greater consistency in pilot practices across the districts

## Looking Ahead: Considerations for State Leaders

The findings above suggest several actions state leaders could consider to support implementation.

### *Considerations for the GaDOE*

- Enhance the information and guidance the department provides.
- Increase opportunities for district and state department staff to reflect, plan, share information and learn from the pilot process.
- Offer more of the department's well-regarded professional learning.
- Further align the department's diverse initiatives related to the teaching and learning of reading, and help educators streamline their efforts.
- Bolster financial support for districts as they tackle key elements of the pilot.

### *Considerations for the Georgia Legislature*

- Revise S.B. 48 to reflect understandings gained from the Dyslexia Pilot work to date, such as:
  - Intervention: IDA does not publish a list of approved dyslexia programs, thus, the "IDA approved" language in the legislation is not something with which districts can comply.
  - Screening: Very few screeners cover all the skills required by S.B. 48, and research shows that it may be unnecessary for an initial screener to cover all the required skills. Expert-informed revisions could reduce district costs and streamline educators' efforts.
- Continue to ensure that sufficient funds for implementing S.B. 48 are appropriated.

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