

the eXaminer



Volume 9 No. 2

August 2020

WELCOME TO THE

NEW

IDA EXAMINER

Our Most Vulnerable Students Are Being Missed

COVID-19

*Can technology help prevent
the COVID slide?*

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DYSLEXIA
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Science of Reading

*Administrators must lead the
way with knowledge*

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Welcome to the New IDA *Examiner*... and the Era of Disruption

Disrupted might be the best word for characterizing our lives in the year 2020.

Living through so many dramatic disruptions has been compared to living through the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the civil unrest of the 1960s all at once. There is a difference, though. COVID and an unstable economy

exacerbate ongoing inequities while protests against systemic racism and social injustices underscore these inequities.

Now more than ever, IDA is dedicated to eliminating inequities that block access to the quality education all children deserve. Social justice rests on a foundation of education. Literacy is a cornerstone in that

foundation. IDA regards literacy and effective reading instruction as civil rights and in a recent statement, we reaffirmed our commitment to work “until everyone can read,” regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or race. (See IDA’s statement [here](#).)

In that same spirit, IDA’s *Examiner* editors congratulate IDA’s

Perspectives editors for their newest issue "[Diverse Vulnerable Learners with Reading Disabilities: A Call to Action.](#)" We call attention to this critically important issue, which has been in the works for months, because it is especially timely. Please see more about *Perspectives* [here](#). We also want to highlight these two *Examiner* articles that showcase *Perspectives* content:

- **"Heartbreaking Data: Our Most Vulnerable Students Are Too Often Missed"** by Timothy N. Odegard, Ph.D., & Emily A. Farris, Ph.D. (see page 10)
- **"Dyslexia and Diversity: Are We Using What We Know to Help Diverse Learners?"** by Nancy Chapel Eberhardt (see page 36)

Why the Examiner's New Look?

Given the disruptions we are living through and the crucial role literacy plays in life trajectories, it never has been more important to work together to promote the science of reading and to bring skilled Structured

Literacy teaching to every child in every classroom around the world.

During the last few months, this imperative has kept *Examiner* editors laser focused. Our objective? Provide vital information to support your work on behalf of vulnerable learners by harnessing the principles of information-communication design to present accessible, engaging, sharable, and actionable content. This is why we have shifted our format from e-letter to e-magazine. COVID realities on our end require a soft-launch approach, but this aligns with our plan to gradually fine-tune with reader feedback.

Hence, starting with this issue, the IDA *Examiner* has a fresh new look, one that will continue to evolve—but already better serves our editorial purpose:

To empower our spectrum of readers—families, educators, advocates, researchers, policymakers, and others—with the information needed for effective decision-making and collaborating

on behalf of vulnerable learners, particularly those with dyslexia and especially in areas of literacy.

Solving the complex challenges of dyslexia and reading difficulties can only be accomplished with the involvement and collaboration of ALL stakeholders. A dynamic e-magazine, with features and departments providing premium content specifically for this spectrum of readers helps (a) empower stakeholders to make informed decisions and (b) foster the understandings needed among and across stakeholder groups to support collaborations that generate powerful solutions.

Please keep an eye on your inbox to watch our redesign progress. We hope our magazine format will inform and inspire you as we work together to improve the teaching-learning landscape for ALL learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or race. And, let us know what you think as we transition to a magazine format!

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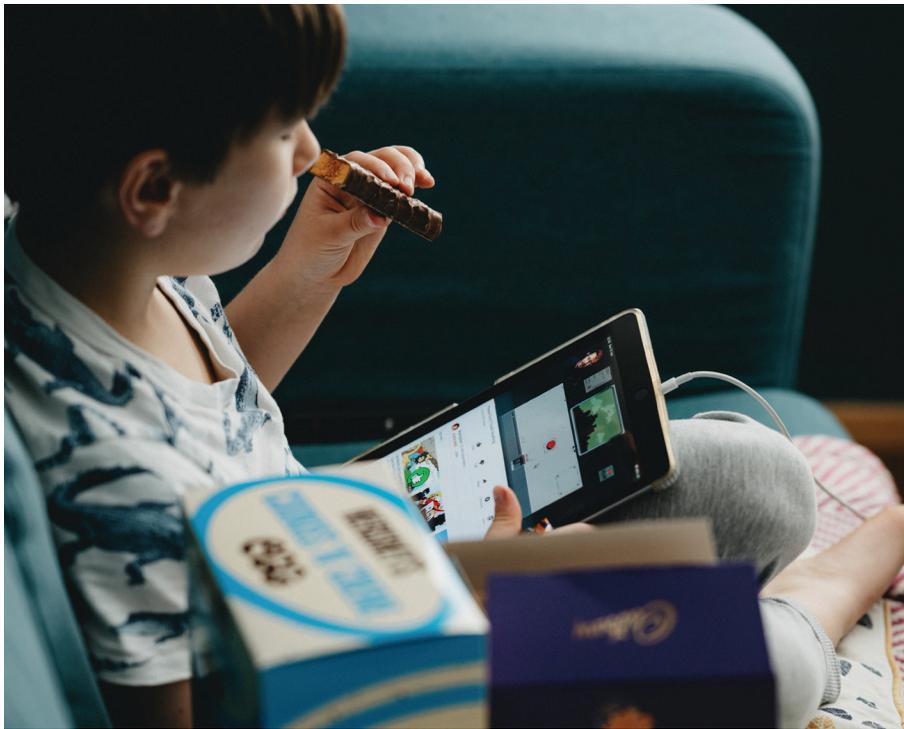
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Your network just got bigger!

Can Technology Prevent the COVID Slide?

By Fumiko Hoeft, M.D., Ph.D., & Kenneth Pugh, Ph.D.



Since the middle of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to shelter-in-place and school closure throughout the U.S. These actions affect at least 55.1 million students, including about 7 million in K-1 ([Education Week: "Map: Coronavirus and School Closures"](#)). Since most schools remained closed until the end of the academic year, students had approximately 6 months of no in-person academic instruction.

These school closures are expected to lead to significant learning losses. Relative to a typical school year, estimates suggest that students will return to school in Fall 2020 with roughly 30% of the year of learning lost in reading and anywhere from 50% to a full year of learning lost in math (NWEA Research: ["The COVID-19 slide"](#)). We believe these losses will have profound impact on the development of basic reading skills in the early grades—especially for children at-risk for learning

disorders and those in special education. For these populations, remote/online learning is challenging. Indeed, extended periods of time without direct instruction, even during a typical three-month summer vacation, can result in the loss of the equivalent of one month of academic performance (["Summer Vacation: Important Insights for Reading Development"](#)).

“Extended periods of time without direct instruction, even during a typical three-month summer vacation, can result in the loss of the equivalent of one month of academic performance.”

Failure to support learning over a period of time twice as long could be catastrophic, especially for children struggling with reading disorders (RD). Further, during shelter-in-place, resources typically available in the summer will be closed (e.g., library, camps, tutoring), disproportionately impacting those with RD. Thus, it is important to encourage literacy practices at home during this period of school

closures by providing access to evidence-based remote learning tools. Through these tools, we may be able to teach and/or remediate key reading-related skills to these young vulnerable learners.

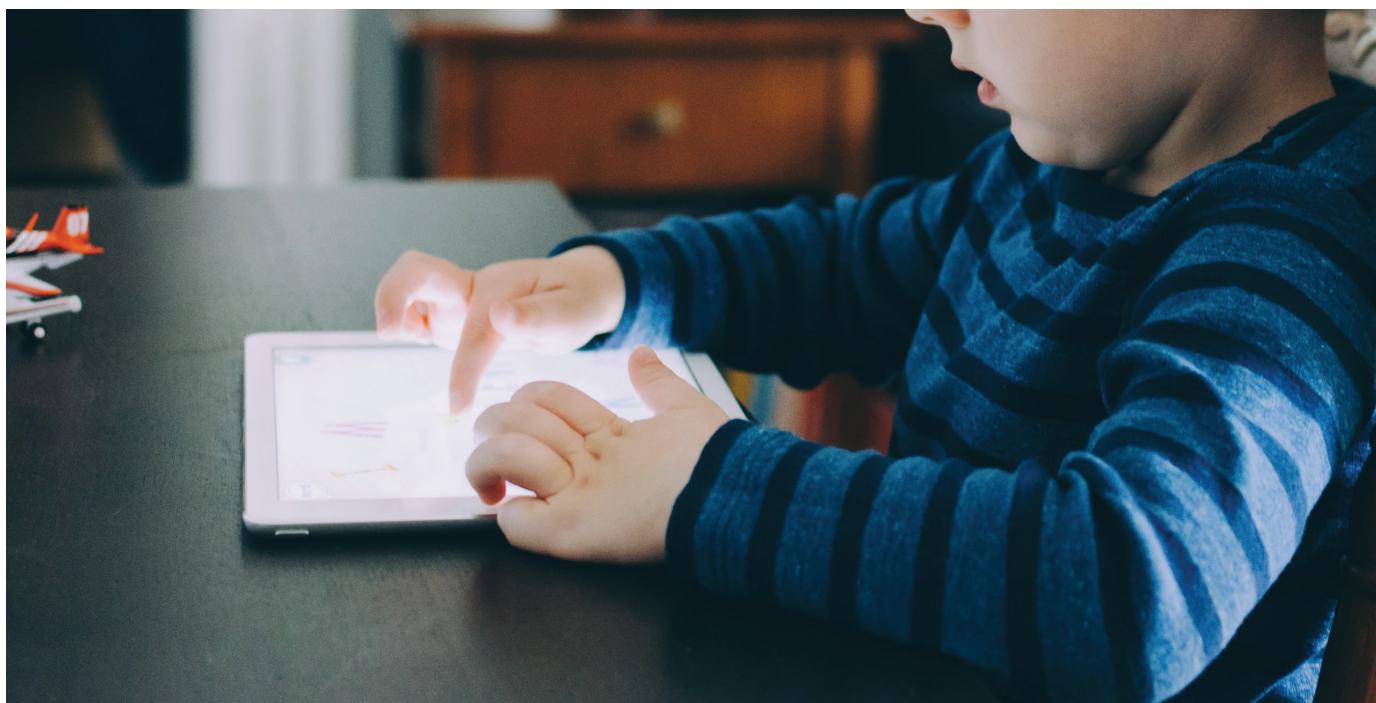
The goal of the R.E.S.C.U.E. ([Reading Slide from Covid-19: Undoing the Effect](#)) project is to examine the extent of the detrimental impact of school closure on learning to read and the degree to which digital and computer adaptive reading games can reduce the expected “Coronavirus Slide.”

The R.E.S.C.U.E. project plans to recruit a large group of educators and parents,

and their K-2 students (total student sample, approximately 2,000) across the U.S. The project will incorporate a researcher developed digital reading instructional program (GraphoLearn) administered online in the home to support the development of essential skills in letter-sound association, decoding, and word reading—instructional content in line with evidence-based reading instruction in the classroom. Research studies (effect size of 0.48) have demonstrated that this program is effective when coupled with adult engagement ([“Critically Reviewing GraphoGame Across the World”](#)); for more

information including details of research evidence to date, see <http://haskinsglobal.org/graphogame/#more%20info>).

Children are encouraged to play the games for 20 minutes per day (divided into 2 sessions), 5 days per week, for 12 weeks on their computers or tablets at home *with their parents’ participation*. Standardized online reading tests are administered at multiple time points to assess progress (before, during, and after the program—with follow-up assessment 3 months and 6 months after completion).



“Estimates suggest that students will return to school in Fall 2020 with roughly 30% of the year of learning lost in reading and anywhere from 50% to a full year of learning lost in math.”

Several key questions constitute the core focus:

- **Which are the critical factors that moderate differences in reading gains from participation in this R.E.S.C.U.E. program** (e.g., when a child enters the program relative to school closure, how frequently and intensely a child practices, degree and consistency of parent participation, and individual differences in reading related component skills at onset of the study)?
- **Can educational technology (i.e., R.E.S.C.U.E.) prevent slides in reading performance caused by school closure?** To answer this question, reading performance of children participating in the R.E.S.C.U.E. project would be compared to similar populations of children not enrolled in this study.
- **To what degree will this pandemic cause learning loss?** To answer this question, students enrolled in this project will be compared to matched national DIBELS 8 and Star data.

To guide future development and refinement of distance learning tools, **the goal of** this investigation is to determine factors that lead to successful learning through **educational technology**. While providing direct support for educators and students who are in dire need of evidence-based remote instructional tools, this study will assess the extent of the detrimental impact of prolonged school closure on learning to read—and whether the slide can be prevented.

Such knowledge can be helpful in the event of future closures by providing guidance on how to teach students who struggle in early reading as well as children living in remote areas within the U.S. where trained reading specialists are not readily available.

Still, many other factors cause distance learning to be a challenge. To truly democratize education, sustained effort will be needed to mitigate these critical factors: adequate technology and technology literacy (*Education Week* "[Disparities in Remote Learning Under Coronavirus](#)") and assistance for educators and parents so that they can support and engage their students/children (*Education Week*: [Where Are They? Students Go Missing in Shift to Remote Classes](#)).

We will keep *Examiner* readers posted on findings from this study of the R.E.S.C.U.E. project.

The R.E.S.C.U.E. Project is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF; grant # 2029373; https://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=2029373) and the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation (<https://www.tremainfoundation.org/>). The project is an initiative of the Haskins Global Literacy Hub (<http://haskinsglobal.org>) that includes researchers and educators globally and is co-directed by Prof. Fumiko Hoeft and Prof. Kenneth Pugh. It is made possible by partnerships with Renaissance Learning, publisher of Star Assessment (<https://www.renaissance.com>); University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, publisher of DIBELS 8 (<https://ctl.uoregon.edu>); and Prof. Devin Kearns (UConn, Haskins); Prof. Nicole Landi (UConn, Haskins, Yale); Prof. John Sabatini (U Memphis); and Dr. Michael Milhan (Child Mind Institute). Other media pieces from NPR, the World Economic Forum and universities can be found on their [website](#). If you are a parent or educator with students Grades K – 2 and would like to participate to receive the 12-week reading game and progress monitoring reports, please visit their website.

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Fumiko Hoeft, M.D., Ph.D., is a developmental cognitive neuroscientist and Professor of Psychological Sciences at UConn. She directs the Brain Imaging Research Center (BIRC) at UConn and Learning Engineering and Neural Systems (brainLENS) located at UConn and UCSF. She also holds appointments at UCSF and Keio University. Dr. Hoeft studies the neurobiological mechanisms of brain development, reading, and dyslexia, with particular emphasis on early identification and resilience. Dr. Hoeft is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the IDA, Co-Chair of IDA's Scientific Advisory Board, and Co-Chair of DyslexiaCon20 (IDA's 2020 Annual Conference). Her honors include awards from the IDA (Norman Geschwind Lecturer; 2014), Learning & the Brain Foundation (Transforming Education through Neuroscience Award; 2015), International Mind Brain & Education Society (IMBES Translation Award; 2018), Society for Neuroscience (SfN Science Educator Award; 2018), and Eye to Eye (2019).

Kenneth Pugh, Ph.D. is President and Director of Research at Haskins Laboratories, Professor of Psychology at University of Connecticut, and Associate Professor of Linguistics and Diagnostic Radiology at Yale University. Haskins Laboratories is a private, non-profit research institute with a primary focus on speech, language, and reading, and their biological basis. His research primarily focuses on the neurocognitive basis of literacy acquisition. He was the 2011 Norman Geschwind Memorial Lecturer for the IDA.



Global Partners Stand Together During COVID-19 Crisis

By Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

The Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) stands together with other Global Partners during the COVID-19 crisis. DAS is currently implementing home-based learning for 3,500 students across 12 learning centers. Some of the students do not have access to online learning, so DAS designed take-home learning packets provided by their staff members. DAS CEO Lee Siang reports that the response has been simply incredible. He states, "It is not the situation but the response" that is important. He is so grateful and proud of all of his DAS colleagues.

Geetha Santa Ram, Director of ELL programs at DAS, has collaborated with Kate Currawala and Massarat Khan of Maharashtra Dyslexia Association in India to determine and share

the most innovative methods for delivering distance learning. They have determined that daily technology tips have been helpful, and they emphasize the importance of providing supportive counseling sessions for students and

“They have determined that daily technology tips have been helpful, and they emphasize the importance of providing supportive counseling sessions for students and their families.”

their families. These leaders around the world will ensure that all children with dyslexia and related disorders receive needed interventions and continue to progress on their journey towards literacy. As Lee Siang says, "We have continued our work; we have just done it differently!"

The DAS approach for ensuring high quality distance learning and supportive counseling sessions is described in the graphic below as a framework for other institutions to consider.

We at IDA congratulate our Global Partners and thank them for staying strong and making a difference in the lives of individuals with dyslexia.



Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, President of Valley Speech Language and Learning Center in Brownsville, TX, also works with the University of Houston-Texas Institute for Evaluation and Statistics. Her research interests include the language and literacy development of Spanish-speaking English learners and interventions for bilingual students. She has authored research articles, book chapters, and interventions for English learners. A former Vice President of IDA's Board of Directors, she is a member of IDA's Global Partners Committee and also serves on the IDA Media and Communications Committee. In 2019, she received IDA's Margaret Byrd Rawson Lifetime Achievement Award.



Familiarization Prior to Implementation (3 Groups)

- Students - introduced to the platform during physical lessons
- Parents - short video, helplines
- Teachers - group sharing and demonstrations among teachers

Ongoing Support with Implementation

- Teachers - daily tech tips, senior colleagues sharing ideas, webinars and online lessons, ICT helpline
- Parents - Customer service and ICT helpline, orientation through videos, webinars and conversations with teachers

Communication

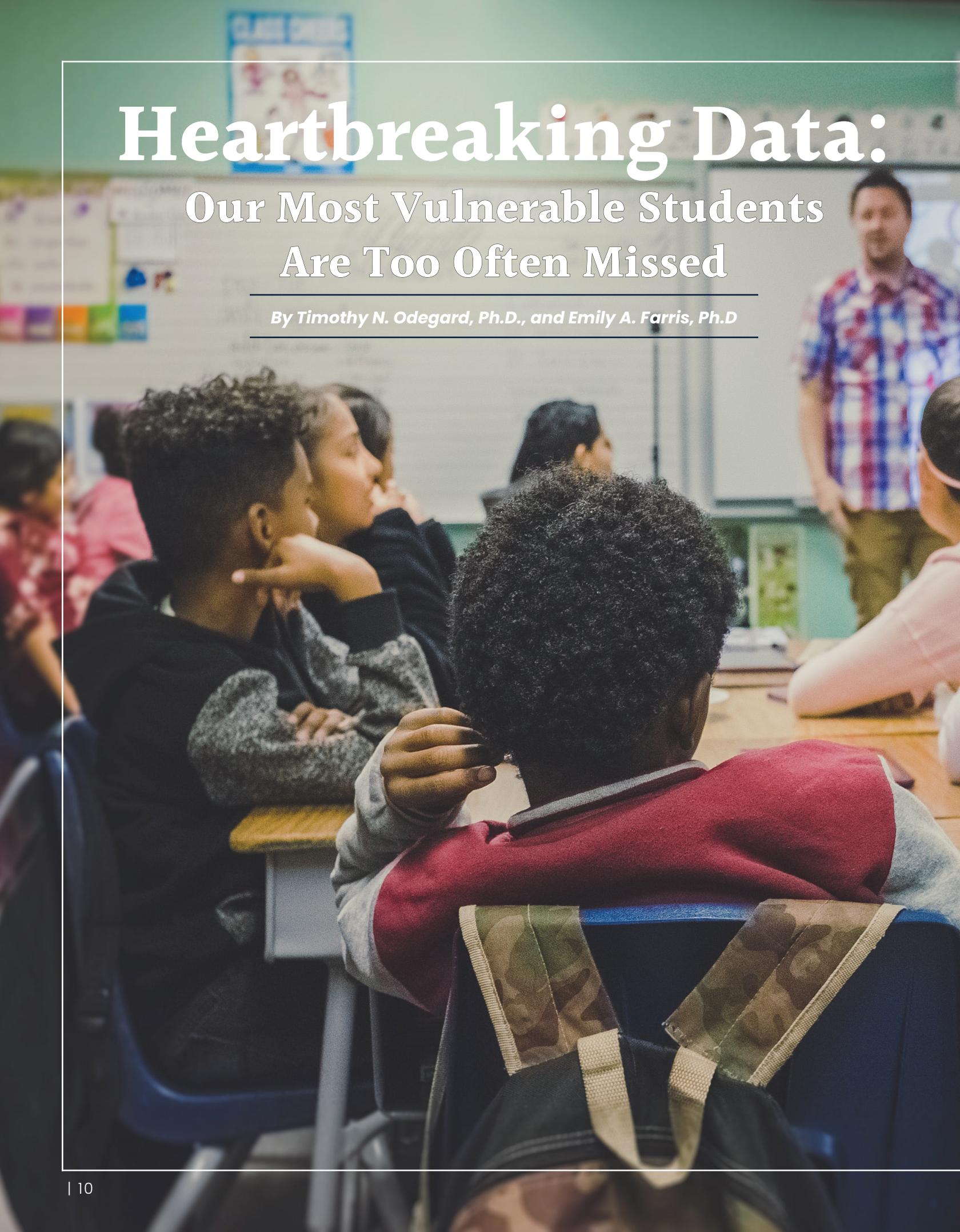
- Centralized messages from CEO, division directors
- Mini-townhalls by the CEO to address concerns from each member of the 14 learning centres
- Follow-up reminders at centre level through centre managers, educational advisors, etc.
- FAQs updated twice weekly

Resources

- Daily tech tips on various tech tools
- Google site on available applications and software with demonstrations
- Conversion of resources to e-resources
- Monetary support for DAS teachers - hardware for online teaching

Emotional Discovery

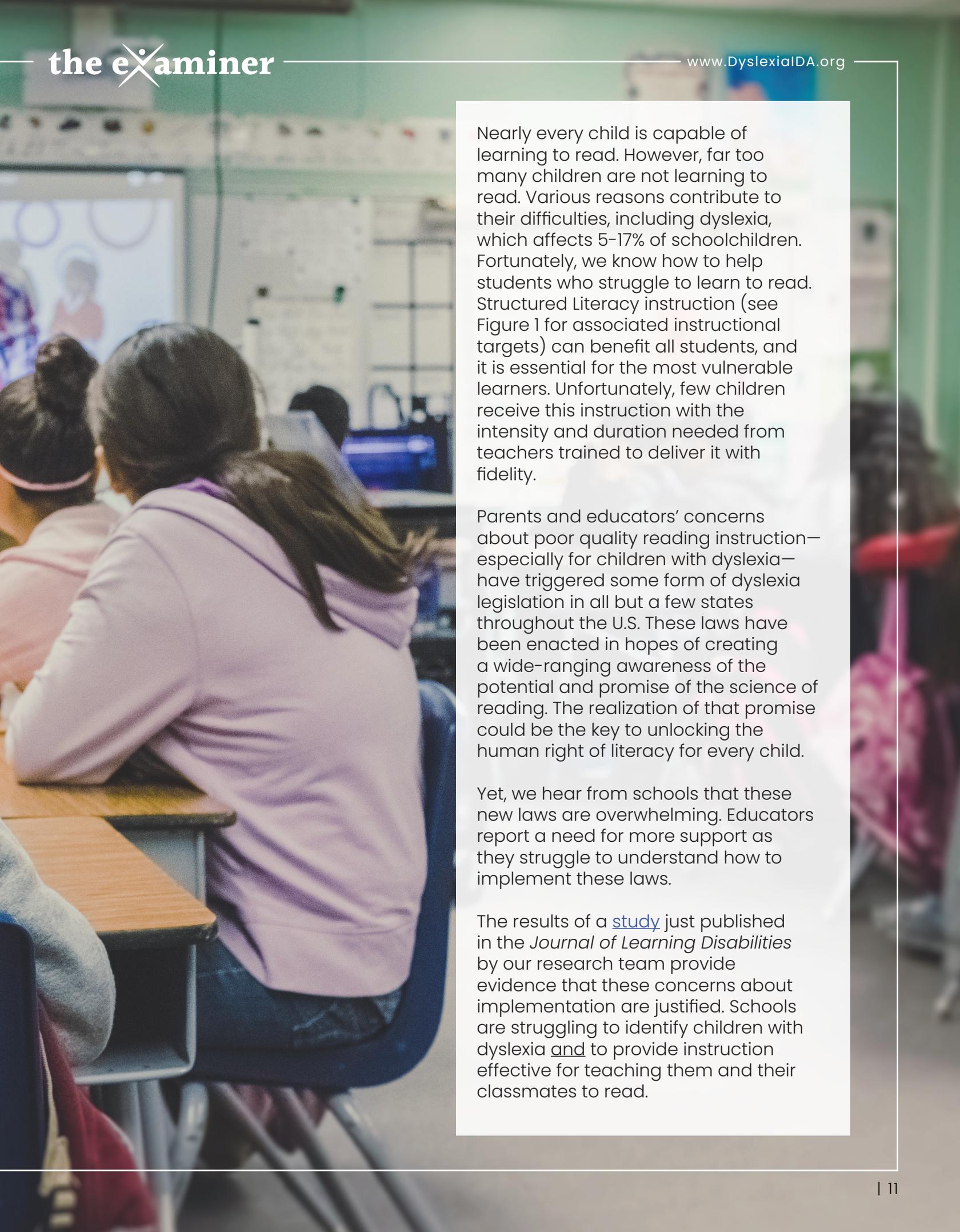
- 4 times a week online support group set-up with mindfulness and counseling angles for stress management
- Making available registered counsellors for further support if required

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a student with dark curly hair is seen from behind, resting their head on their hand. They are wearing a red and grey hoodie. A camouflage-patterned bag is on their lap. In the background, other students are seated at desks, and a teacher in a plaid shirt stands near a whiteboard. The room has educational posters on the wall.

Heartbreaking Data:

Our Most Vulnerable Students Are Too Often Missed

By Timothy N. Odegard, Ph.D., and Emily A. Farris, Ph.D

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a student with long dark hair, wearing a light purple hoodie, is seen from behind, sitting at a wooden desk. Other students are visible in the background, some looking towards the front of the room. A teacher is partially visible at the front, standing near a whiteboard. The room is brightly lit, and there are educational materials on the walls.

Nearly every child is capable of learning to read. However, far too many children are not learning to read. Various reasons contribute to their difficulties, including dyslexia, which affects 5–17% of schoolchildren. Fortunately, we know how to help students who struggle to learn to read. Structured Literacy instruction (see Figure 1 for associated instructional targets) can benefit all students, and it is essential for the most vulnerable learners. Unfortunately, few children receive this instruction with the intensity and duration needed from teachers trained to deliver it with fidelity.

Parents and educators' concerns about poor quality reading instruction—especially for children with dyslexia—have triggered some form of dyslexia legislation in all but a few states throughout the U.S. These laws have been enacted in hopes of creating a wide-ranging awareness of the potential and promise of the science of reading. The realization of that promise could be the key to unlocking the human right of literacy for every child.

Yet, we hear from schools that these new laws are overwhelming. Educators report a need for more support as they struggle to understand how to implement these laws.

The results of a [study](#) just published in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* by our research team provide evidence that these concerns about implementation are justified. Schools are struggling to identify children with dyslexia and to provide instruction effective for teaching them and their classmates to read.

Findings: Children Are Slipping Between the Cracks

For this study, we examined reading scores from a universal screener administered to a little over 8,000 2nd-grade students. These data were shared through a partnership between the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia at Middle Tennessee State University and the Arkansas Department of Education. In our sample, *school-based teams* had identified about

10% of these 2nd-grade students as struggling readers due to dyslexia. That value falls within the prevalence rates agreed upon by most researchers. This finding suggests that identification procedures put in place in response to state law are having their intended effect.

However, the results of the study also gave us a reason for concern. In addition to the 10% of students identified with dyslexia *by their school-based teams*, an additional 27% exhibited deficits in spelling and reading fluency

Scores below expectations in both reading and spelling are indicators of dyslexia. But most of the students identified as struggling to read and spell were not identified as having dyslexia. Why is there a discrepancy between deficits identified by a universal screener and the identification rate of dyslexia by school-based teams?

This question prompted us to wonder what predicts which children who struggle to read and spell will not be identified with dyslexia. Their performance on the universal screener indicated they were not meeting expectations in reading and spelling. Yet, they had not been identified with dyslexia by their school-based teams. Which factors might contribute to this? The data reveal some troubling trends.

The likelihood of missing a specific student who struggles with reading and spelling increased when a larger percentage of students in a child's school performed below expectations on measures of both reading and spelling. What does that result mean? It suggests that when more students in a school struggle to read and spell, it is more difficult to find those students who struggle to read and spell due to dyslexia. In short, when most of the other kids in your school struggle to read and spell, not being able to read and spell does not make you stand out. Your reading and spelling deficits are not viewed as exceptional or unexpected. We also observed that black

Much Work Left to Be Done: Not Simple, Not Easy

There are no simple answers—no one-size-fits-all plan to meet the challenges highlighted by these data. Addressing the needs of teachers by supporting them with continued targeted training is a must. Providing instruction that aligns with methods that have proven to be effective is also necessary. However, the realities highlighted by this study and an overwhelming amount of data from other studies demonstrate social inequities resulting from limited educational opportunities and outcomes linked to race, ethnicity, and poverty. This nuanced and complex societal problem must be addressed with systemic changes that go well beyond the walls of the schoolhouse because schools are part of communities, and communities make up the fabric of society.

We encourage you to consider these complexities and to learn more about the needs of diverse learners as you read the **Summer 2020 issue of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy***. Edited by Dr. Nicole Patton Terry, this issue focuses on diverse learners and their needs. It provides a point of reference for appreciating just how nuanced this topic is. The authors give a resounding call to action.



and Hispanic children were less likely to be identified with dyslexia. In fact, black and Hispanic students were *only half as likely* as white students to be identified with dyslexia by their schools—even when the universal screener had documented their reading and spelling deficits. Also, schools with a larger percentage of racial and ethnic minority students and schools with a higher percentage of students living in poverty identified fewer students with dyslexia.

Black and Hispanic students were only half as likely as white students to be identified with dyslexia by their schools—even when the universal screener had documented their reading and spelling deficits.

These findings are sobering. They highlight the fact that the challenges we face as a society are more significant than addressing the needs of 5–17% of children struggling to read due to dyslexia. Our data suggest that a primary reason schools struggle to identify and address the needs of children with dyslexia is a lack of quality reading instruction for all children. Universal screening results for the 2nd-graders in our study demonstrated that 37% of the sample were not meeting expectations in reading and spelling—far more than even the largest estimated prevalence rate of dyslexia (i.e., 17%). Simple logic suggests that the majority of these children (i.e., 20%)

are not struggling due to a neurobiological difference in how they process language (i.e., dyslexia). Instead, they are struggling due to some other factor. One of the most likely candidates is ineffective reading and spelling instruction.

Moreover, most children in the study presented with a mixed profile of literacy deficits. As depicted in **Table 1 (page 15)**, they struggled with some aspect of print skills (reading or spelling) and an area of comprehension (vocabulary or reading comprehension). That means these students need more than phonics instruction—and Structured Literacy includes much more than phonics instruction. ([An explicit approach to teaching exemplifies structured literacy. Perspectives on Language and Literacy. 46\(1\), 21-23.](#))

The Challenge: Quality Reading Instruction for Every Child

These data underscore the challenge at hand: providing quality reading instruction for every child in every classroom. This instruction must be aligned with all the instructional targets specified as part of Structured Literacy (see **Figure 1, on page 15**, for these instructional targets). We cannot help the few students who struggle due to dyslexia without

addressing the needs of the many students in our schools who do not receive quality reading instruction.

The obstacles to translating research into practice are vast. The realities highlighted by these findings can lead to feelings of defeat or a sense of hopelessness. However, we already have the knowledge we need to implement quality reading instruction. What remains is putting the necessary infrastructure in place to make this instruction a reality for all children.

How do we use this data to keep moving forward?

The findings reinforce a need to ensure that systems are in place to identify and address the needs of all children, especially those from vulnerable populations. These populations include children with dyslexia, racial and ethnic minorities, children of color, and communities in poverty. Our results add to the overwhelming evidence that we must improve reading instruction for all students. Explicit and systematic instruction aligned to the consensus of scientific knowledge that has emerged on reading and spelling instruction is essential. This instruction benefits all students and is necessary for children with dyslexia. The provision of high quality comprehensive Structured

Literacy instruction, delivered by well-trained teachers, will lead to improved reading and spelling abilities for all students.

Awareness Is Not Enough

There is growing agreement that awareness of what and how to teach is only part of the solution. Awareness alone does not solve the overarching issue. Instead, addressing the real needs of schools and communities is central to meeting the challenge.

Schools need trained educators with deep knowledge of what to teach and how to teach it. Educators need materials and support for delivering instruction. Administrators need knowledge of the science of reading so they will be aware of what they should see when observing teachers—and so they will be able to support the efforts of teachers in their schools. Schools and educators need actionable data to help identify and make adjustments, as required, for the reading and writing growth of all students. Also,

families and communities need the resources and support to ensure that their children will thrive.

In short, we need to help everyone with all we've got. Because the time is now, and the future can't wait. And the children are our future.

Note: The findings summarized in this article were reported in a study published in the Journal of Learning Disabilities (see below).

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[Characteristics of students identified with dyslexia within the context of state legislation.](#) *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.



Timothy N. Odegard, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology and holds the Katherine Davis Murfree Chair of Excellence in Dyslexic Studies at Middle Tennessee State University, leading the efforts of the Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia. He serves as the Associate Editor of *Annals of Dyslexia* and on the editorial board of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*. Additionally, he has worked with students with reading disabilities, having completed a two year dyslexia specialist training program at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas as part of his postdoctoral fellowship.

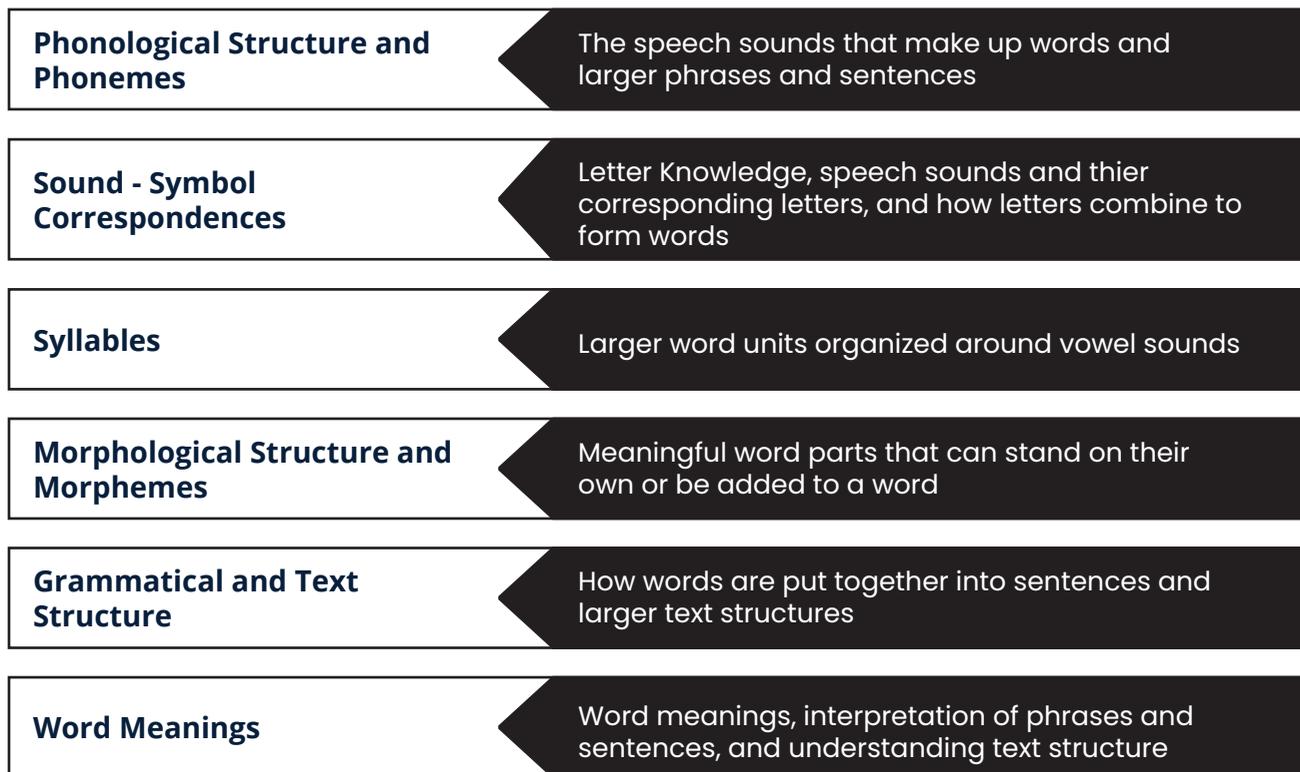
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Table 1. Percentage of Second Grade Students Below Benchmark Across Academic Areas Related to Reading

Reading Deficit Profile	School Based Classification			
	None	Dyslexia	SLD	DYS & SLD
Dyslexia	14%	11%	6%	0%
Comprehension	8%	3%	1%	1%
Mixed Type	39%	81%	92%	98%
Total from All Profiles Below Benchmark	61%	95%	99%	99%

Figure 1. Instructional Targets for Structured Literacy



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CHRONICLES FROM THE CLASSROOM

Administrators Lead the Way:

When Armed with Knowledge of the Science of Reading *by Margie Gillis, Ed.D.*



What Do We Know?

In the first episode of *Chronicles*, I discussed how important it is for teachers to have substantive knowledge in order to make informed decisions about approaches for teaching children to read. Since that article was published in February 2018, there has been a lot of buzz about the science of reading and teachers' lack

of training related to this body of research. What has not been discussed explicitly, and something I did not specifically mention in my previous article, is how essential the involvement of administrators is in this work. How much knowledge and what level of experience do administrators need to have with evidence-based practices in order to support teachers and students?

That thought leads to another important question: What do states' current preparation programs look like for education leaders? In most states, aspiring administrators must become certified by their state departments of education in order to qualify for a position as a principal, curriculum director, or other educational administrator. A cursory look at some of the programs shows lists of courses that focus on educational leadership, organization, policy, management, research design, ethics, and diversity. Rarely have I heard of or seen any evidence that a leadership training program designed for school administrators includes a course, or better yet a series of courses, that teach the science of reading.

Digging deeper, I learned that the Education Commission of the States, an interstate organization focused on education policy, published "50-State Comparison: School Leader Certification and Preparation Programs" in 2018. The only state to include a literacy requirement is Massachusetts—and even then, the required test measures candidates' basic reading comprehension and writing competency rather than their pedagogical knowledge as it relates to beginning reading skills.

Why do I feel strongly that the omission of a literacy knowledge requirement is problematic and contributes to our students' abysmal reading scores? Because in every school where



“Rarely have I heard of or seen any evidence that a leadership training program designed for school administrators includes a course, or better yet a series of courses, that teach the science of reading.”

my mentors and I have worked for the past 20 years, principals are responsible for evaluating their teachers’ performance in the classroom. Since *all* teachers, regardless of the grade they teach, must teach some aspect of reading to their students, principals *must* know what to look for.

A typical principals’ “walkthrough” checklist includes some of the following: student engagement, posted lesson objectives, evidence that teachers are checking for understanding and adjusting instruction, use of formative assessments, and teachers’ demonstration of content knowledge. While I do not disagree with most of these ‘look fors,’ what I question is, “*How can an uninformed principal look for something he or she doesn’t understand deeply?*” For example, how will the administrator know if the teacher really knows the content (i.e., language structure as related to reading instruction)? Should they look for a teacher who models reading a text fluently or should they look for a well-informed teacher who knows how to give corrective feedback when children

read a text *without* fluency or inaccurately?

Not only do principals need to know how to evaluate their teachers’ classroom performance, they also need to know how to analyze assessment data and should lead by example so that they and their teachers will continue to learn about the latest research findings. It is principals who make the final decisions about how discretionary money is spent. If they understand the key current research in the science of reading, they are more likely to make meaningful purchases that will help all students—but especially those students who struggle the most.

What Can We Do?

First, we have to continue to build the public’s awareness of the problem. As more citizens learn the facts and understand what is driving our nation’s stagnant reading achievement, they can take action and exert pressure on their legislators to develop policies to effect change. In addition to contacting and working with legislators, local education agencies (LEA) and

state education agencies (SEA) should work together to support legislative changes. In order to solve the problem, all stakeholder groups—citizens, legislators, LEAs, and SEAs—must be held accountable for results and implementing policy changes.

But in the meantime, since policy change takes time, we need to find ways to engage principals in learning the science of reading. In our coaching work, we encourage administrators, both at the school and district levels, to attend our professional development workshops so they can learn the pedagogy of teaching reading along with their teachers. Last year one of our principals (formerly a middle school science teacher) attended our monthly series on the Science of Reading. After each day-long session, he returned to his school and modeled lessons that he learned in one of his teacher’s classrooms. When this does not happen, we request separate meetings with school administrators to build their reading content knowledge

One very effective method

we have used to engage principals in learning this complex information is to have them use their smartphone to take a knowledge survey. The results are displayed—but anonymously—so it is only possible for each principal to know if he or she answered the question correctly or not. After the correct answer for each question, and the group data is displayed, an explanation is given, and discussion is encouraged.

Once principals realize they have a lot to learn, and they see how much support their teachers need to apply critical content knowledge in their classrooms, we guide administrators in the use of literacy protocols for each domain of comprehensive

literacy (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and oral language). We have used these checklists in several ways over the past twenty years:

- In embedded coaching to provide teachers with concrete guidance so they can learn how to apply their new knowledge
- In our research studies to document the use of evidence-based instruction
- In our work with administrators.

We know that knowledge is not enough. While teachers

must have the knowledge to inform their practice, they need to see what it looks like in the classroom—preferably with *their* students—in order to be able to use the knowledge to implement effective instruction.

For all of the reasons we know, this work is not easy. Nevertheless, we must work on all fronts to make a concerted effort to raise our students' reading scores to ensure their academic and life-long success. There is no more important job than teaching children to read. Their lives depend on it. Their parents and caregivers have entrusted us—teachers, policy-makers, LEAs, SEAs, *and administrators*—with the care and education of their children. We cannot let them and their children down.

“There is no more important job than teaching children to read.
Their lives depend on it.”

Margie B. Gillis, Ed.D, CALT, is a Certified Academic Language Therapist who became interested in reading while studying with Isabelle Liberman at the University of Connecticut. In 2009, Margie founded Literacy How to provide professional development on how best to implement research-based reading practices in the classroom. In 2010, Margie founded the Anne E. Fowler Foundation to continue the work of her mentor. The Foundation supports scholarships for teachers to earn advanced degrees in Reading and Language Development at Fairfield University. Margie also is the co-founder and former president of Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, the former president of the CT Branch of IDA, and a board member of the New Alliance Foundation. She is also a professional adviser for Read Works and Understood. The column *Chronicles from the Classroom* presents her experiences in the field of reading and offers concrete suggestions about what we can do to right the educational ship.



CHOOSING PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

How Do I Know Which Programs Are Best for Students with Dyslexia?

Principles for Deciding Whether or Not Instructional Programs and Interventions Are Evidence-Based

By Devin Kearns, Ph.D., and Fumiko Hoeft, M.D. Ph.D.

Teachers and parents often hear about intervention programs through advertising and promotion. However, it can be difficult to judge whether these programs are supported by reliable research—especially for students with dyslexia. This article offers recommendations to help parents and educators evaluate these programs and explains why high-quality research methods are so important.

How do parents and educators determine which programs are effective for students with dyslexia? Which principles should they use to assess whether or not an intervention is evidence-based?

Consider the following scenarios:

On social media, a parent of a child with dyslexia writes about his child's experience with Brain Books (hypothetical name), a new program focused on meeting the needs of students with dyslexia. "We were totally shocked," he writes. "We didn't expect Brain Books to be a breakthrough, but it was. I don't usually endorse things, but I'm recommending this program. Check out the website." As an educator or parent, you might think, *"It sounds intriguing, but how do we evaluate it to make sure it works for many children, not just this one?"*

The school district has a dyslexia coordinator who sends teachers and parents of students with dyslexia—including you—a 10-page document containing detailed information about a

program you have never heard of. The dyslexia coordinator writes, "We are considering purchasing this. What do you think?" There are a lot of bar graphs that seem to suggest it works, but you aren't sure how to interpret them. You think, *"Are these actually good data? I am not a statistician, so I'm not sure. This is pretty overwhelming."*

Teachers and parents of students with dyslexia often search for new and unique resources, hoping they will provide breakthrough progress for their students or children. Unfortunately, many companies have developed products—advertised as interventions effective for teaching students with dyslexia—that have no evidence of effectiveness for teaching these students. How can parents and teachers determine which programs and technologies are supported by research and which ones are based primarily on wishful thinking or developers' desires

to sell their products?

The three principles below can help you decide whether or not programs and strategies are likely to be effective:

1. Begin with healthy skepticism
2. Determine whether or not a program is evidence-based
3. Examine the research cited by program developers.

#1—Begin with healthy skepticism.

Humans are susceptible to believing information that may not be supported by data. We tend to believe (a) people who are like us, (b) attractive people, and (c) ideas that sound familiar (Willingham, 2012). Parents and teachers of students with dyslexia sometimes consider unconventional programs because conventional ones have not resulted in academic progress.



Many programs involving unconventional components—albeit activities hypothesized to support reading development—do not even include the teaching of reading. Below are examples of components advertised as interventions to improve reading for students with dyslexia:

- Neurofeedback or biofeedback (Liddle, Jackson, & Jackson, 2005)—wearing a head strap that detects theta and beta waves produced by the brain and concentrating in ways that affect the wave pattern
- Activities to improve working memory (Anderson et al. 2018; Landis et al., 2018)
- Doman and Delacato Treatment-DDAT (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1982; Doman et al., 1960)—wearing masks to increase cerebral blood flow, hanging upside down, and doing somersaults.

Other examples involve reading—but include unconventional ways of practicing reading:

- Wearing eye patches while reading (Galuschka, Ise, Krick, & Schulte-Körne, 2014; Stein, Richardson, & Fowler, 2000)
- Placing color overlays over text or wearing colored lenses during reading (e.g., Iovino, Fletcher, Breitmeyer, & Foorman, 1998; Irlen & Lass, 1989).

Data collected from use of programs and approaches

that include some of these unconventional practices suggest mixed or negative effects (See Kearns & Fuchs, 2013 and Burns et al., 2017). At best, the data are inconclusive.

We are not arguing that educators should never use any of these programs. However, we do urge caution and encourage careful analysis when considering recommendations to use unconventional programs or even conventional reading programs. Both types can vary significantly in quality.

Caution is important because we can be swayed by recommendations from people we trust, even when these recommendations are not based on reliable evidence. Do not assume a new program will work for your student or child. Maintain skepticism as you listen to program developers pitching their programs. Some may be “homegrown,” developed by concerned parents and educators. Others come from large publishing companies. Both often use extensive anecdotal evidence to support claims of effectiveness. Their *beliefs* may be stronger than the *data* they have gathered. As we examine programs to consider their effectiveness, we need to put aside our biases as well as anecdotal data from friends, colleagues, and developers.

#2—Determine if a program is evidence-based.

Instructional programs—unconventional or conventional—for students with dyslexia can be classified on a continuum to determine whether they are evidence-based. Chiefs for Change (2016) provided one widely used scale:

- **Moderate-to-strong evidence:** At least one moderate-to-high-quality study providing positive evidence of a program’s effectiveness (two categories combined)
- **Promising evidence:** At least one correlational study providing evidence of a program’s effectiveness
- **Evidence demonstrating a rationale:** Program has not been tested itself, but principles of effective literacy instruction were included in its design.

There are many programs that have only “evidence showing a rationale”—which means that the program developers have not tested the program using high-quality research studies. Programs with this lowest level of evidence may be very useful, but it is not possible to be *certain* they are effective without thorough

As we examine programs to consider their effectiveness, we need to put aside our biases as well as anecdotal data from friends, colleagues, and developers.

studies. It is still possible to evaluate one of these programs by examining whether it includes components of structured literacy—instructional strategies that meet many of the IDA [Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading](#) (International Dyslexia Association, 2018). The components of structured literacy include phonological awareness, systematic explicit phonics instruction, reading fluency practice, direct teaching of reading vocabulary, and high-efficiency reading comprehension strategies. *(Some readers may be surprised to learn that the multisensory components of programs alone do not have strong data; that is, data do not indicate programs must include multisensory elements to be effective. Programs that contain these elements often do have evidence of positive effects. However, programs without multisensory elements also often have positive effects.)*

[Armbruster](#) et al. (2003) wrote a helpful non-technical introduction to these strategies based on findings of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). You can also learn about dyslexia-specific strategies in a special issue on dyslexia in [Teaching Exceptional Children](#) (2019, Volume 51, Issue 3). Resources from [The National Center on Improving Literacy](#) provide useful information related to the components of effective literacy instruction.

Some programs have not been tested by researchers but might still work for students. Parents and teachers can evaluate these programs to see if they have evidence demonstrating a rationale. The rationale for using a program for teaching students with dyslexia is that the program includes the components of structured literacy. Explaining structured literacy is beyond the scope of this article. Parents and teachers will need to review the [IDA Standards, Put Reading First](#), and the [NCIL website](#) to learn the details of these components.

Programs that demonstrate only a rationale should be evaluated carefully by comparing them to the content and principles of instruction for structured literacy. Parents and teachers should carefully examine samples to ensure the program actually addresses a component—not just that it says it does. If the review shows a program meets this minimal standard, it may be appropriate to use—but programs with a higher level of evidence should be considered.

There are resources to help parents and educators learn whether a program has promising or moderate-to-strong evidence—or only a rationale. Some resources and guidance are suggested below:

[What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\)](#): The WWC website, which provides evaluations only of programs that meet the highest standards of evidence, is produced by the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), research arm of the U.S. Department of Education. One criticism of WWC is that the

standards are so high that many programs with moderate evidence are excluded.

[Evidence for Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#): This website includes a wider range of programs, and it provides an indicator of the strength of the evidence. Most programs with positive evidence on the WWC website are also represented on Evidence for ESSA, making it a broader alternative to WWC.

[National Center for Intensive Intervention \(NCII\)](#): This website includes a variety of programs and uses similar standards to Evidence for ESSA. It includes fewer programs than Evidence for ESSA, but they do not entirely overlap. As a result, it is worth checking the NCII website if Evidence for ESSA does not contain a review of a program or if parents or educators seek a different point of view.

[Evidence-Based Intervention Network \(EBI\)](#): This resource, provided by the University of Missouri, is designed to help consumers select an intervention or program based on specific needs. It may be necessary to use the website's search function to find information related to a particular program.

It is important to keep in mind that these websites are not perfect. A program rated as effective may not be appropriate for students with dyslexia. When reviewing a report on a program, parents and educators should look for answers to these questions:

- Does the website specifically state that the program is effective for students with or at-risk for dyslexia—or only students in general?
- Does the website indicate that data were collected about how well students read words?
- Does the website say that the data were collected on students the same age as yours?

If the answers to these questions are “no,” consider these situations:

- A program may be effective for “all readers,” but the evidence supporting it might be weaker for students with dyslexia.
- In addition to age, the performance level of students in a study must be considered. A program effective with children performing between the 25th and 35th percentile in word decoding may be much less effective for teaching students with dyslexia whose decoding scores are almost always below the 25th percentile.

Recently, concerns have been raised about the *independence of program evaluation*. When studies are funded by program developers, there may be questions about a conflict of interest. Developer-funded studies are not necessarily a problem because developers are often the first to test their new programs. What it does mean is that families and educators should examine the evidence from those studies very carefully.

#3—Examine the research cited by program developers.

Often, developers’ websites state that their programs are evidence-based and may provide data supporting their statements. These claims may seem to support the idea that the programs have promising, moderate, or even strong evidence—and sometimes this is true. However, these claims may be based on results of low-quality studies. This makes it necessary for families and educators to know how to read and evaluate studies designed to determine whether or not programs are effective—and for whom.

Which study elements raise concerns? Figures 1A–1D show made-up examples of research information provided by several imaginary program developers. Examine each of them to identify problems the information provided might reveal. Next to each example are comments to point out why a particular element of a developer’s study might raise concern or increase confidence in the effectiveness of the program. Note that research provided by almost all developers will include information that would ordinarily concern us (e.g., anecdotes). Anecdotes are not problematic—as long as they are not the only source of data. **Table 1** describes potentially concerning practices and points out which parts of **Figures 1A–1D** reflect these concerns.

Which study elements are evidence of good practice?

By contrast, developers’ data may show that the programs have been rigorously evaluated. The checkmarks in **Table 1** indicate examples of positive components of program research in **Figures 1A–1B–1C–1D**. Studies that include certain features provide evidence of very rigorous evaluation:

- Use of a comparison group that does not receive reading support but is known to have similar characteristics to the group receiving experimental reading support
- Information about the size of the effects (i.e., degree to which the program improves achievement relative to the comparison group)
- Self-reported caution about over-interpreting the results (e.g., clearly stating that only the developers have tested the program or that even better studies need to be done)
- Statistics that indicate the reported effects are not due to chance.

Why are comparison groups and random assignment important? Comparison groups, sometimes called control groups, comprise students—for the purposes of this article, students with dyslexia—who participate in the study but do not receive instruction in the target program. **Figure 2** provides an example of how researchers might assign subjects to groups for a study of the imaginary *Buchanan Program*, an intervention for students with dyslexia—the

target intervention in this study. In this example, an independent research team is working with the developer of the *Buchanan Program* to test its effects. **Figure 2** shows two comparison groups. One is a *usual school support group*, sometimes termed *business as usual*, in which students continue with the instructional support students with dyslexia typically receive—including any other interventions the school typically does. The other is a group that receives a different imaginary intervention, *Partner Reading Plus*.

How does random assignment work? To conduct the study using random assignment, the researchers would do the following:

1. Enroll students whose parents give permission for their children to participate in the study.
2. Randomly assign students to groups.
3. Complete pretests for current levels of reading skills.
4. Provide instruction in either the *Buchanan Program*, *Partner Reading Plus*, or usual school support provided for students with dyslexia.
5. Complete posttests for reading skills. At the end of the study, the researchers can compare the performance of students in the *Buchanan Program* to those in the other comparison groups by analyzing the pretest and posttest scores for each group.



Figure 3 shows the relative effects of the *Buchanan Program*, *Partner Reading Plus*, and the reading support usually provided by the school. The dots represent the scores at pretest and posttest, and the line shows how much the reading performance of each group has changed. The steeper the slope, the more growth students have made. The target program, the *Buchanan Program*, showed that students improved from the beginning to end of the study. However, the students in that program made no more progress than students who only received the usual school support. By contrast, **Figure 3** shows that *Partner Reading Plus* students demonstrated greater gains—with beginning performance slightly below scores of both the *Buchanan Program* group and the group of students receiving usual school support but ending with higher scores than both of those groups. In this imaginary example, the research team set out to determine whether or not the *Buchanan Program*

was better than others, but they found that *Partner Reading Plus* actually worked better.

Why is random assignment important? **Figure 4** shows why random assignment is so important. This is the design of a study with just one group. As we have already shown, the *Buchanan Program* showed positive effects over the year—but no better than usual school support and less than *Partner Reading Plus*. If researchers test a program without comparison groups, increases in the scores do not mean much. To illustrate this further, readers can examine **Figure 1C**. The Year 3 scores for the *Buchanan Program* in **Figure 1C** are the exact same scores for posttest for the *Buchanan Program* in **Figure 3**, a mean score of about 64. If researchers used only the research design in **Figure 4**, they would not know their program did no better than usual school support.

In short, random assignment allows us to be confident that a positive outcome does not occur only because the student became older and learned more from instruction at school. Either of these factors might explain why the *Buchanan Program* students improved during the study. Random assignment ensures that the researchers do not form groups that favor the target program—something that can happen by accident. In the end, developers' data may not show good effects—even if they initially appear to do so.

Conclusion

This article provides step-by-step guidance for deciding how to choose an effective intervention program. Even with all this information, you may still feel unprepared to choose

a program with confidence. We understand. Our goal has been to introduce strategies for evaluating programs. We hope it will encourage dialogue among colleagues about how to evaluate the next time someone recommends a specific program.

In addition to differences among interventions, there are individual differences within students—their inherited abilities, their interests, their prior school experience, and so on. Hence, a program that has not proven to be effective for many or most students could be effective for a specific student. In these cases, it may be appropriate to implement an intervention, even if the data are not strong (but are not clearly negative). However, when implementing programs with unknown effects, teachers need

to systematically determine whether the program is working for their students and, if not, adjust instruction. Data-based individualization (Filderman et al., 2018; Schumaker et al., 2006; Wanzek et al., 2013) is a research-validated approach for doing this. Kearns, Pollack, and Whaley (2018) provide guidance for getting started with data-based individualization, and the [NCII](#) provides extensive support beyond that.

In the end, the value of a program lies in a student's response. Is the student making meaningful progress? If we use data to answer the question, and the answer is no, the steps and principles outlined above will help you search for a more effective intervention or instructional program.



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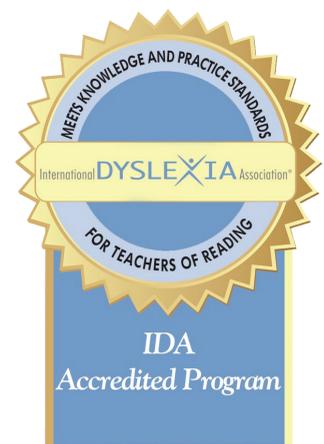


Table 1:
Possible Concerns about Research on Intervention Programs for Students with Dyslexia

	Concern	Why This Concerns Us	1A R&S	1B CRS	1C TBP	1D PR+
1	Reference to papers that state the program components align with best practices but without referencing the NRP or IDA standards	In the absence of promising, moderate, or strong evidence, papers referencing the NRP or IDA show that the program demonstrates a rationale. Without this, there is no supporting evidence at all.	✗	✓	?	?
2	Studies not including students with dyslexia, had small samples, were conducted in one geographic area, and/or were done with limited demographic variability (including variability in age)	A program might be effective in general—but may not be appropriate for students with dyslexia. Studies with small samples or in a limited area could mean that a program would not work as well in a different place or with different groups of students. Age may be a particularly important factor.	✓	✗	✗ ✓	✓
3	Use of one group pretest-posttest design with no comparison groups and lack of statistical analysis to compare groups—or claims it is a study without achievement data collection	Comparison groups—especially with random assignment—assure us that students benefit from the program more than another program and/or usual school support. Statistical tests assure us that the difference between groups is large enough to be meaningful.	✓	✗	✗	✓
4	Use of anecdotal data or data on number of users	Testimonials are compelling because they are so personal, and numbers of users sounds impressive, but these have nothing to do with program effectiveness	✗	✗	✓	✗
5	Mention of famous researchers, celebrity educators, revered universities, or well-known conferences	These can give a false sense of effectiveness. The researchers and educators may not be experts on dyslexia. Universities have many departments and not all faculty know about dyslexia. Conferences do not usually require developers to provide evidence to exhibit there.	✗	✗	✗	✗
6	Focus on non-academic student outcomes or teacher outcomes rather than reading achievement scores	The essential goal is to improve reading achievement.	✗	✗	✓	✗
7	Data only from the program developers and not outside evaluators	When studies are conducted or funded by program developers, it can raise the concern about conflicts of interest.	✗	✗	✗	✓

Key

✓	Program does not have this concern
✗	Program has this concern
✓ ✗	Partly has this concern and partly does not
?	Unclear if this issue applies because it was not addressed in the research review.

Figures 1A. Imaginary research data provided by imaginary program developers. These examples illustrate the kinds of information provided on developers' websites.

R&S™ Reading and Spelling . . .

by Making and Sorting Words
a resource book to help students with dyslexia
with lesson ideas and materials

Prior Research Support

- Papers on reading by **R&S** developers
- Ways R&S includes research-based strategies for word reading and vocabulary learning
- Endorsements for **R&S** from more than 100 university professors

Recent results

Average satisfaction of students with dyslexia for reading support classes (out of 10)

	R&S	Control
Pre	4.52	5.14
Post	7.94*	7.13

Statistically significant effect for **R&S**
*p < .05. N = 435 (urban & rural areas)

It is not sufficient to include generic papers on reading. It could give the rationale but does not say anything about the program [see Table Concern #1].

It is not sufficient to include endorsements. We want to see actual research on the program [Concern #4]. Mentioning professors could give a false sense that the program is legitimate [Concern #5].

The focus on student satisfaction is a good first step but progress on achievement ultimately needs to be shown [Concern #6]. There is no mention of an outside evaluator performing the research, and it may have been done by individuals with conflict of interest (e.g., the founders that might financially gain from this) [Concern #7].

Good! Data were collected across many schools with many students and diverse areas [Concern #2], and research includes a control (=comparison) group [Concern #3].

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Figures 1B. Imaginary research data provided by imaginary program developers. These examples illustrate the kinds of information provided on developers' websites.

Creative Reading Solutions

Different approach, better results for *all*

evidence-based

- ✓ Prior evidence for **CRS**
 - ▶ Read Dr. Melissa Zavieri's data brief: "CRS and the Big 5 from the National Reading Panel"
 - ▶ Read Dr. Zavieri's *Cotham Times* profile: A Top 100 Education Researcher

Innovative

- ✓ Nation-wide recognition of **CRS**
 - ▶ Winner of the Reading Company Expo's "Most Innovative Program" award!
 - ▶ Featured on UFS-TV's *Orca Tank*
 - ▶ Now adopted by schools in 27 states!

Successful

New! [Click here to read our recent study:](#)
CRS teachers reflect on successes

"For all" suggests this may not be appropriate for students with dyslexia specifically [Table Concern #2].

OK. "Data brief" based on the National Reading Panel indicates that the authors are aligning with the components described by Armbruster et al. (2003). This is the lowest level of evidence, so it is especially important to review further. It would be important to look carefully at the brief and the program itself to see if this is accurate [Concern #1].

Mentioning celebrity professionals could give a false sense that the program is legitimate [Concern #5].

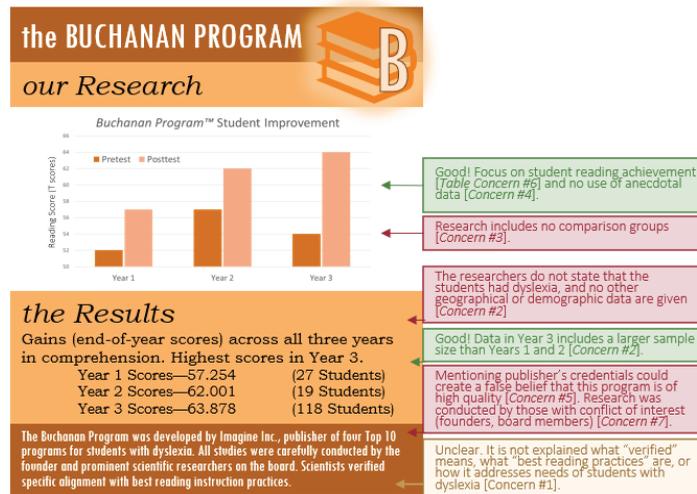
Mentioning nationwide-recognition, such as awards and airing on TV, could give a false sense that the program is widely used and legitimate [Concern #5].

Data about the prevalence of the program have nothing to do with effectiveness [Concern #4].

Described as a "study" but does not meet study criteria. No data on the program and no comparison group are shown [Concern #3]. Focus is on teacher reflections only with anecdotal comments and not on students' academic outcomes [Concerns #4 & #6]. The description suggests the developers did the study themselves [Concern #7].

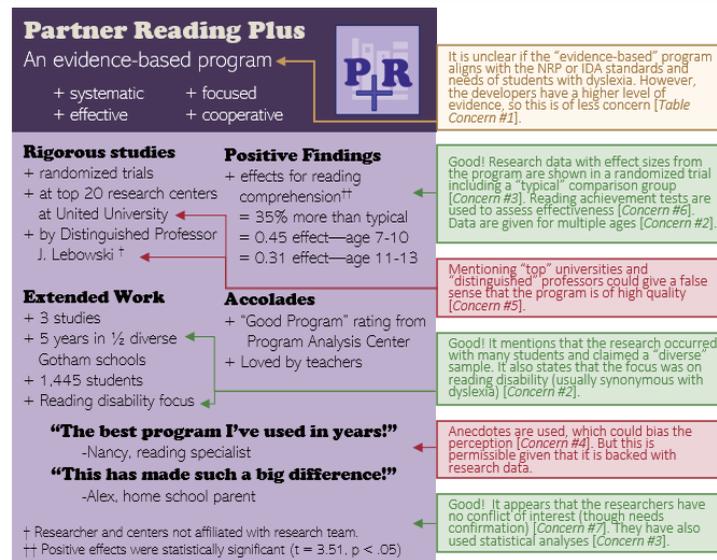
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Figures 1C. Imaginary research data provided by imaginary program developers. These examples illustrate the kinds of information provided on developers' websites.



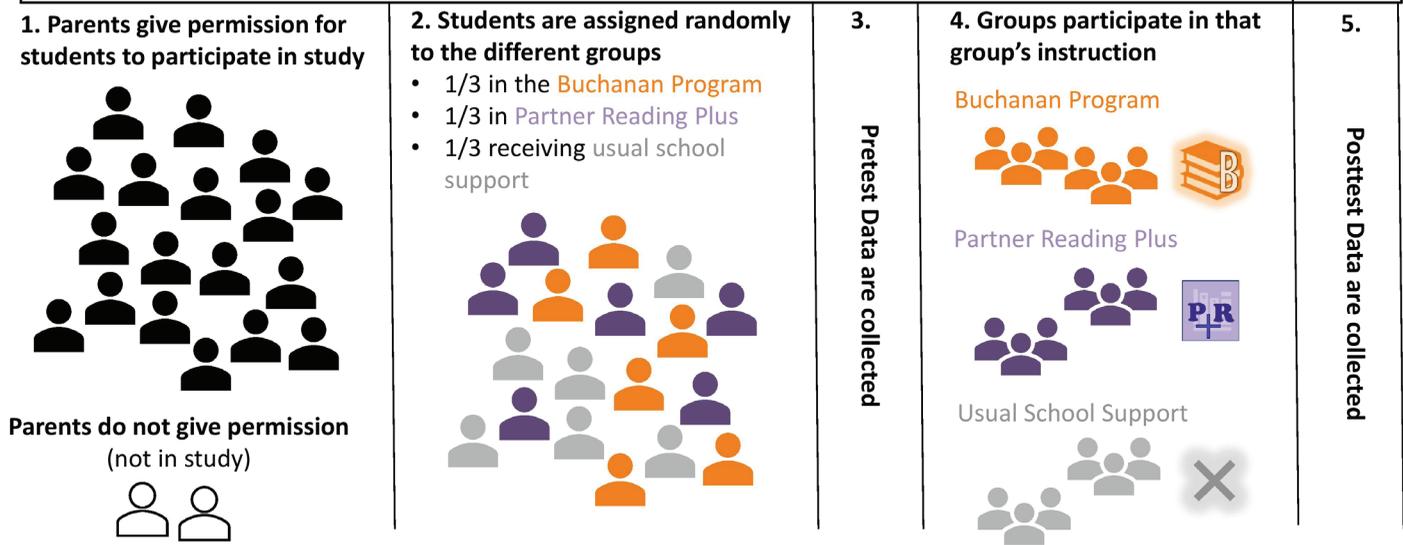
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Figures 1D. Imaginary research data provided by imaginary program developers. These examples illustrate the kinds of information provided on developers' websites.



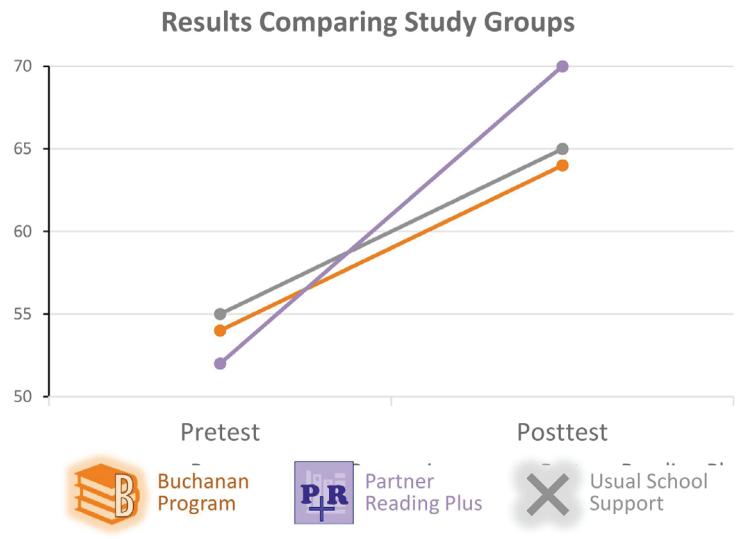
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Figure 2. Example of a study with random assignment for a target intervention, the *Buchanan Program*, and two comparison groups. One is another intervention, *Partner Reading Plus*, and the other group receives only usual school support.



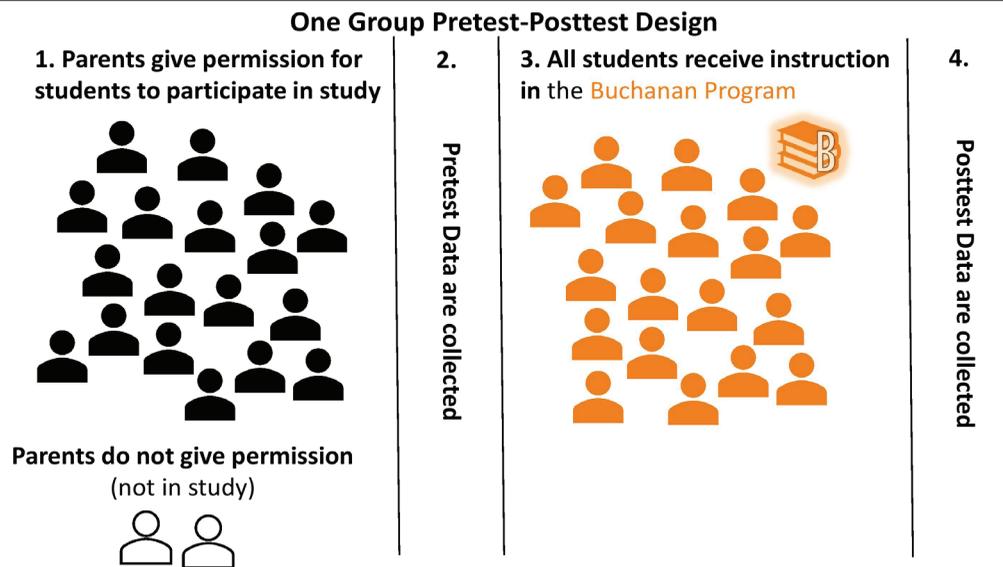
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Figure 3: Results of a hypothetical study of two imaginary programs and a usual school support group. These results show that the target intervention, the *Buchanan Program*, showed no better effects than usual school support and less improvement than *Partner Reading Plus*, a comparison group the researchers did not expect to outperform the program they intended to test.



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Figure 4. A one-group pretest-posttest study design. This design cannot give us confidence that the *Buchanan Program* is effective because it is not compared to anything else.



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DyslexiaCon20 will feature the

Gordon F. Sherman Neuroscience and Education Symposium

“Breaking Through Research-Practice Barriers: The Promise & Progress”



Reading, Literacy & Learning
ANNUAL IDA CONFERENCE

► This annual symposium in Dr. Sherman’s name honors his vital contributions to neuroscience, education, policy, and the International Dyslexia Association. This symposium explores the why and how of engaging researchers and educators in building bridges for bidirectional communication and effective collaboration on behalf of **all** students.

Session Chairs



Laurie E. Cutting



Benjamin Powers

Featuring:

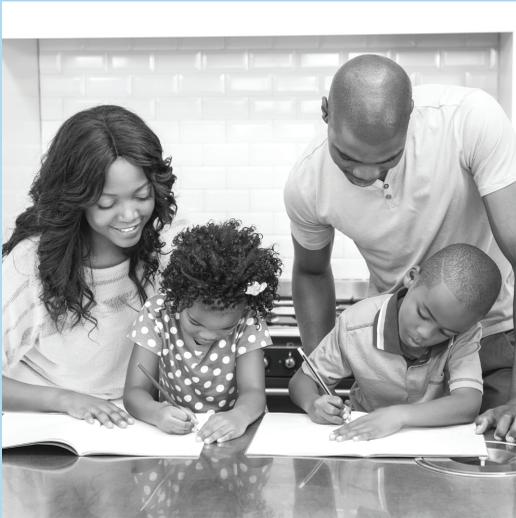
- Albert M. Galaburda
- Sharon Vaughn
- Jessica A. Church
- Julie Washington

➔ [Click Here to Register](#)

Don't miss this opportunity to see giants in the field of dyslexia present these important topics!

We Care About Families—Ours and Yours

by the Family Connections editorial board



Members of the publications team here at IDA care deeply about families, ours and yours.

Many of us are parents of kids with dyslexia, some of us ourselves have dyslexia, and all of us believe in the mission “to actively promote effective teaching approaches and intervention strategies for persons with dyslexia and related disorders” (see the IDA Handbook: [What Every Family Should Know](#)).

IDA publications are an integral part of that mission because they disseminate information to our members and others around the world.

For many years, the IDA publication, *Dyslexia Connection*, has served parents and families by providing them with up-to-date information to address our children’s needs.

In an effort to operate more efficiently, and we hope, more effectively, *Dyslexia Connection* will now appear as a feature in the *Examiner*. As a parent, family member, or someone with dyslexia, you will continue to have access to *Dyslexia Connection* articles, but you will also find articles on so much more (e.g., policy issues and the latest research). The *Examiner* audience will benefit too. Most of our subscribers are interested in all aspects of dyslexia and effective instruction. Including articles for families and parents of students who struggle with reading will help teachers better understand the needs of families and their students. It will also help educational professionals and researchers stay connected to the needs of their students, clients, and the educational system as a whole.

Be sure to check this space in the next edition! Until then, see IDA’s [latest Resource Guide](#), which includes resources specifically for families. Let us know what you think and how we can do more to support you and your family at Communication@DyslexiaIDA.org.



Family Passes are now available for our upcoming **COMPLETELY VIRTUAL DyslexiaCon20!** Your Family Experience includes advocacy, community, and family breakout sessions, the Youth Advocate Program (YAP) Roundtable, access to the Exhibit Hall, and much, much more! **Learn more and register today!**

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Dyslexia and Diversity: Are We Using What We Know to Help Diverse Learners?

By Nancy Chapel Eberhart

In the Spring 2020 issue of *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, theme editor Nicole Patton-Terry and her contributors tackle the topic of diversity—its disparities regarding access, application of research, and implications for teaching. These authors present a sobering picture. What we know about teaching literacy is failing to reach many of our most vulnerable students.

This issue’s team of contributors wrestle with the topic from the legal to historical perspectives and from the vantage points of educators to parents. Together they cover these pivotal topics:

- Diverse learners and the promising practice of Response to Intervention (RtI)
- Spoken dialect variations and implications for reading

- performance
- English Learners (ELs) and reading disabilities—recent research regarding academic language and reading interventions
- Cultural competence—what it is and why it is a critical component in improving response to instruction for diverse learners with disabilities
- Potential for school and community partnerships to improve reading outcomes for vulnerable learners
- One African American family’s experience navigating the special education system for their children as a catalyst for training hundreds of parent advocates.

Patton-Terry maintains that current research not only provides a roadmap for addressing difficulties and

disabilities among diverse learners, but also underscores our urgent responsibility to do so. This upcoming issue of *Perspectives* is a call to action to meet the needs of diverse learners by putting what we know into practice.



Spring 2020
Perspectives
Cover



Nancy Chapel Eberhardt is currently an educational consultant and author. She has experience as a special education teacher, administrator, and professional development provider. Nancy contributed as author and co-author to the development of the literacy intervention curriculum LANGUAGE! Currently, she is working with Margie Gillis to develop the Literacy How Professional Learning Series. As a member of IDA’s *Perspectives* Parent/Practitioner Publications Committee, she has served as co-theme editor to several issues.

All IDA members receive *Perspectives* in their inboxes.

Not an IDA member? Don’t miss the important issue previewed above—join IDA to receive *Perspectives* and other valuable IDA member benefits!

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International DYSLEXIA Association®

How to Advocate for Assistive Technology Tools and Services

What is Assistive Technology?

Assistive Technology (AT) refers to both tools and services that facilitate access to grade-level curriculum for students with disabilities. *Access to the curriculum* means that students are able to take in and understand the material being taught in school, understand and complete assignments, and demonstrate what they have learned.

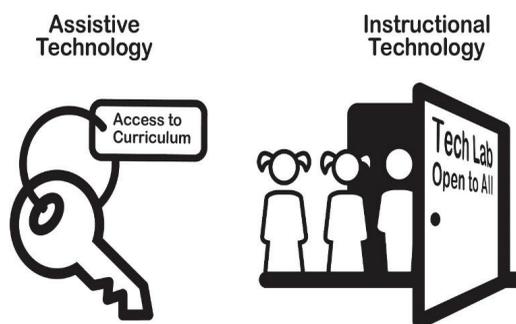
An AT *tool* is a physical device that “is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” It can be a device that is available commercially “off the shelf,” and it can also be a device or software that has been modified or customized to meet the specific needs of a student. An AT *service* is “any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device” (<https://ectacenter.org>).

AT is the bridge that provides an entry point to the content (the information that students need to understand and learn) that cannot otherwise be accessed. AT tools and services are used when a student cannot access the traditional curriculum independently. Until a student with dyslexia has received sufficient intervention to be reading and writing at grade level, he or she will need assistance in accessing grade-level content. This access is essential, as it minimizes gaps in knowledge that will result if grade-level content is too difficult for the student to read and comprehend without the technology.

AT **tools** can include specialized physical devices and equipment as well as computers and software.

Examples include the following:

- text-to-speech devices that read text to a student;
- speech-to-text devices that allow students to dictate what they want to write and then types it for them; and
- spelling, grammar, and vocabulary support options (part of most word processing programs) or web extensions or “plug-ins” that can be added to a web browser that can assist with grammar, word choice, and sentence structure.



AT **services** should be provided along with AT tools to select and use the tools effectively. Examples of AT services include the following:

- evaluation procedures;
- selection and customization of devices;
- the development of plans to integrate AT tools with other aspects of the student’s educational program; and

IDA fact sheets are **convenient, professionally reviewed** materials designed to improve understanding and support advocacy initiatives. Fact sheets are frequently used to enrich and supplement **IEP meetings, school board discussions, and district policy initiatives**. See our full library of fact sheets [here](#).

- training for students, parents and professionals who work with the student.

How is AT different from Instructional Technology?

Instructional Technology (IT) is technology that is designed to provide additional practice and exposure to educational content, and it's often available for all students. An example of IT is an app that provides additional practice for a particular skill, such as learning the states and capitals or reviewing multiplication facts. IT can be very useful for students with learning disabilities, but it is often available to students without disabilities as well. AT is uniquely critical for students with disabilities, to provide the same access to the curriculum that other students have.

How are AT services obtained?

The consideration of AT services for a student with an active IEP *is required by law*. The laws have been rewritten and reworded since 1975 and have had a variety of names. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally created in 1997 and last updated in 2006, explicitly stated "school districts were required to consider the need for assistive technology whenever a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was developed." As of 2011, IDEA applies to children ages birth to three years old, as well as

school-aged children (<https://ectacenter.org/top-ics/atech/laws.asp>). For more details on AT and the law, please go to www.gpat.org/Georgia-Project-for-Assistive-Technology/Pages/Legal-Mandates-for-Assistive-Technology.aspx

The forms associated with an IEP vary from state to state, but the wording that relates to AT will generally be a variation of the following:

Present Levels of Educational Performance

B: Other Educational Needs

General Considerations

Check all that apply.

<input type="checkbox"/> Adapted physical education	<input type="checkbox"/> Assistive tech devices/services	<input type="checkbox"/> Behavior
<input type="checkbox"/> Braille needs (blind/visually impaired)	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication (all students)	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication (deaf/hard of hearing students)
<input type="checkbox"/> Extra curriculum activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Language needs (LEP students)	<input type="checkbox"/> Nonacademic activities
<input type="checkbox"/> Social/emotional needs	<input type="checkbox"/> Travel training	<input type="checkbox"/> Skill development related to vocational preparation or experience

Other _____

OR

Assistive Technology: The student _____ needs _____ does not need assistive technology.

Before an IEP meeting, the parent and/or caregiver should find the section referring to AT in the IEP and highlight it. During the IEP meeting, if the team does not offer it, insist that an AT evaluation be

FACT SHEETS

conducted to determine if AT services are needed for the student to access grade-level curriculum.

Implementation of AT services

Once the AT evaluation has been completed, the team must reconvene to determine appropriate tools and services and plan for their implementation. It is essential that these steps take place only after the SETT framework has been considered.

SETT stands for Student, Environment, Tasks, Tools (Zabala). The order of this acronym is essential as the following three factors should be considered first: 1) S: the strengths and challenges of the student; 2) E: the environment in which the student needs to complete the work; 3) T: the task the student needs to complete. Only after considering the first three factors should the team decide on 4) T: the tools or services needed. At times, a school district may want to suggest a specific tool because it is available within the district already, but it is essential to start with the student's specific needs and only decide on tools and services after discussing the student's strengths and challenges, the environment and the tasks to be completed. The types of tools and services that are readily available within the district may be different than what the student needs.

- In addition to using the SETT framework, the tools chosen must "support achievement of goals and progress in the general curriculum

Each tool must take into consideration the unique needs of the student, and it is important to identify a way to measure and observe whether the AT device is working as intended (www.qiat.org).

- It's also critical to ensure that use of the tool is helping the student meet his or her IEP goal(s). The IEP should be written with specific, measurable criteria to assess whether this is occurring.
 - Advocates should insist on transparent data collection and set a date to review this data to assess the effectiveness of the tool.
 - Rather than requesting a specific brand (for example: an iPad) make sure to write the features that are needed within the technological tool to support the learning goal.

Next steps

- Engage a qualified AT specialist to do the AT evaluation.
- If the school does not have an AT specialist employ, they must contract with an outside provider.
- The school district pays for the evaluation and any tools or services needed as determined by the AT evaluation. The law states in Section

300.105 “that the school system is responsible for addressing assistive technology when it is required as a part of the student’s special education services, related services, or supplementary aids and services. Use of school-provided assistive technology is not limited to the school setting” (www.gpat.org).

- Follow the SETT framework.
- Determine who will capture data about the effectiveness of tools and services, when the data will be collected, and the environments in which the data will be collected.

Once an AT plan has been put into place, it is important to set a time to reconvene to discuss how the tool(s) are working. Make sure to get feedback from the student, as well as the teacher(s) and parent(s). Make sure to discuss whether proper training for use of the tool was provided, review the data on effectiveness, and alter the AT plan as needed.

If a school states that it cannot provide an AT evaluation or any type of AT support, refer to the resource entitled “[Strategies for Assistive Technology Negotiations](#)” by Dave Edyburn, Ph.D. If the building principal will not comply, go directly to the director of special education at the district level.

Access for all

AT provides an access point to the curriculum that is essential for students who have learning challenges. All students, including those with disabilities, have the right to access the information being taught in school and to demonstrate what they have learned, and AT can be the key to making that happen.

When advocating for AT, it is essential that communication is open, clear, and transparent. Although advocating for a student can be stressful and challenging, obtaining services that will facilitate access to grade-level curriculum is vital.

Resources

<https://osepideasthatwork.org/node/121>

<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/assistive-technology/assistive-technologies-basics>

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/assistive-technology-resources>

<https://www.atia.org/at-resources/what-is-at/>

<http://www.joyzabala.com/>

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) thanks Nanci Shephardson for her assistance in the preparation of this fact sheet.

Want more information on Assistive Technology? [Click here](#) to watch the webinar, “**Things to Know About Assistive Technology During Distance Learning,**” presented by Jamie Martin, on IDA’s YouTube Channel.

LINKS we LIKE

by Nancy Cushen White, Ed.D.

In this fast-paced world, it can be difficult to keep up with the latest news and research from so many different sources. What's true? What's not? Who is reliable? Who is just trying to sell the latest fad? In an effort to keep you in the loop, we regularly summarize and share a few of our favorite links. This *Examiner's* "Links We Like" focuses on a range of topics related to literacy and reading instruction. What do rights, principals, ammunition, and neural mechanisms all have in common? Find out by clicking on one of the numbered links below. We have also provided longer summaries of each link on pages 42-44.

1. In a potential landmark ruling on April 23, the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals makes a declaration: **Literacy is a constitutional right.**
2. An infographic from Consortium on Reading Excellence in Education (CORE) illustrates **six principles of personalized professional learning** that lead to effective implementation, instructional change, and student achievement.
3. Castles, Rastle, and Nation provide ammunition for **ending the reading wars** by presenting a review of the science of reading that explains what all children need to learn to become skilled readers—and how that knowledge can be translated into effective classroom practices.
4. A study by Yu et al. examines whether **putative protective neural mechanisms** can be observed—at the prereading stage—in children with a familial risk who later develop typical reading abilities.



1. Federal Appeals Court Declares Literacy a Constitutional Right

In an April 23, 2-1 ruling, the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals held that **access to a basic minimum education "that can plausibly lead to literacy" is a fundamental, constitutionally protected right.** The court held that basic literacy is "implicit in the concept of personal liberty," and central to "the basic exercise of other constitutional rights," including political participation. In this landmark ruling, the decision stated, "It may never be said that a child born in this country has the same opportunity for education, without regard to the circumstances of her birth. But the Constitution cannot permit those circumstances to deny a child the same opportunity and deny a child literacy without regard to her race, ethnicity, or national origin."

For further developments, see [Education Week: School Law](#) and [Detroit Free Press](#)



UPDATE!
Federal
Court Appeal
Vacates
Ruling



2. Infographic: From Training to Transformation—how to change instructional practices

Avoid Being Condemned to the Life of Sisyphus: Rolling a Stone Up a Mountain Only to Watch It Roll Down Again—90% of teachers report that participation in professional development is ineffective. Just like their students, teachers need multiple opportunities for extensive purposeful practice in order to master a new instructional skill. Before teachers can transfer knowledge and skills learned in professional development workshops into effective ELA instruction, they need guided practice and coaching in implementation of their new learning—in the form of targeted classroom teaching strategies. CORE’s infographic clearly shows the 6 key principles of effective ELA personalized professional learning and how they can lead to instructional change.

3. Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert

By Anne Castles, Kathleen Rastle, and Kate Nation

Almost all children are *capable* of learning to read, but far too many children are *not* learning to read. This discrepancy has led to a deep interest in *how* children learn to read and the most effective ways for teaching them. Despite decades of research in psychological science that has provided answers, changes based on this scientific knowledge has been very slow to work its way into educational policy and practice—including teacher preparation programs in universities.

This lack of congruency has resulted in decades of “reading wars.” Still today, there is a great divide: The gap between ideas and instructional practices based on the science of reading—and the ideas and instructional practices most often used in America’s classrooms remains wide and unrelenting. Castles, Rastle, and Nation attempt to narrow this gap by presenting a review of the science of learning to read as it relates to earliest skills all the way to reading behaviors of expert readers. Their review covers all that children need to learn to become skilled readers—and how that knowledge can be translated into effective classroom practices. They call for **an end to the reading wars** and make recommendations for “instruction and research in reading acquisition that is balanced, developmentally informed, and based on a deep understanding.”



Speaking of links we like, connect with us on social media!





4. Putative Protective Neural Mechanisms in Prereaders with a Family History of Dyslexia Who Subsequently Develop Typical Reading Skills

By Xi Yu, Jennifer Zuk, Meaghan V. Perdue, Ola Ozernov-Palchik, Talia Raney, Sara D. Beach, Elizabeth S. Norton, Yangming Ou, John D. E. Gabrieli, Nadine Gaab

Developmental dyslexia affects 40–60% of children with a familial risk compared to a rate of 5–10% in the general population. Despite the increased risk, about half of the children with a familial risk develop typical reading abilities. The neural characteristics underlying these favorable reading outcomes in at-risk children remain unknown. This study examines whether **putative protective neural mechanisms** can be observed—at the prereading stage—in children with a familial risk who later develop typical reading abilities:

- Distinct brain activation patterns were identified during phonological processing tasks between those with familial risk who subsequently developed typical reading abilities and those without familial risk who subsequently developed typical reading abilities.
- Results of the study suggest that some protective neural mechanisms are already established in children with familial risk who develop typical reading abilities—and that these protective neural mechanisms support their typical reading development.

Nancy Cushen White, Ed.D., CALT-QI, BCET is a Clinical Professor, Dept. of Pediatrics-Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine, at the University of CA-San Francisco (UCSF). Over the past 40+ years, she has taught students in general/SPED classrooms at public/private schools, provided psycho-educational assessment and literacy intervention, trained pre-/in-service teachers and practitioners, developed curricula, and been involved in policy (e.g., AB 1369 Dyslexia Guidelines Work Group—CA Dept. of Education). She piloted a San Francisco Unified School District special day class for 2e—Twice Exceptional students who were gifted with a diagnosis of dyslexia; has taught literacy skills to young adults in a pre-trial diversion program through San Francisco Superior Court—Mentor Court Division; and has worked as a Literacy Intervention Consultant and Case Manager for Lexicon Reading Center—Dubai—United Arab Emirates. She is a certified Instructor of Teaching for the Slingerland Multisensory (Multimodal) Structured Language Approach (Structured Literacy). Certified by IDA as a Structured Literacy Dyslexia Specialist, she is a past IDA board member, currently represents IDA on the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), serves as the editor of IDA's *Examiner*, and is a member of the advisory board for the Northern California Branch of IDA.



BOOK REVIEW

Pennington, McGrath, and Peterson Deliver Another Outstanding Volume

By Susan Lowell, M.A

Diagnosing Learning Disorders: From Science to Practice, Third Edition

Bruce F. Pennington, Ph.D., Lauren M. McGrath, Ph.D.,
Robin L. Peterson, Ph.D., ABPP
The Guilford Press. NY, NY. 2019. Hardcover. 399 pages. \$45.00

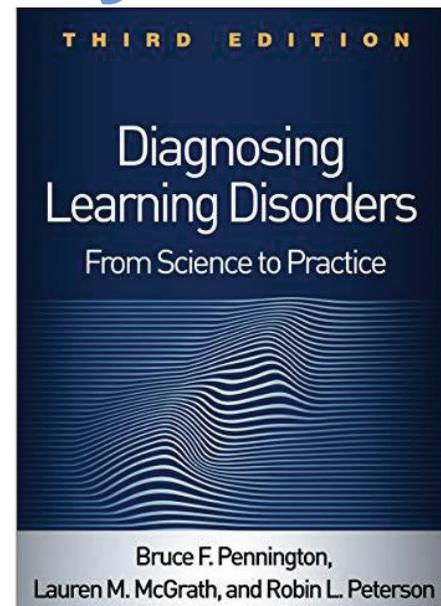
Once again Dr. Bruce Pennington, with Dr. Lauren McGrath and Dr. Robin Peterson, delivers an authoritative and updated text on all aspects of learning disorders (LDs), translating recent evidence and the latest scientific advances into practice.

This is a must-have volume for neuropsychologists, psychologists, literacy specialists, special educators, educational diagnosticians, occupational and physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and all who provide consultation, assessment, and treatment for children and adults with LDs. Like the previous editions by Pennington, this third edition also is a vital resource and reference for graduate students who wish to understand the causes, diagnoses, treatments, and prevention of the most common LDs. (This is a required text in the book review author's graduate level course on assessment of reading and written language.)

The authors believe there is a moral imperative to this work, saying, "The ultimate goal of scientific research on learning disorders, like all bio-medical research, is to improve public health by improving early detection, intervention, and ultimately prevention." They go on to describe the ongoing reciprocal relationship that occurs in the real world as evidence informs practice, specifically describing "a 'virtuous cycle' between science and practice: Practice leads to scientific questions, and scientific research improves practice, which in turn leads to more scientific questions."

Part I: Scientific Foundations

This text is divided into two sections. Part I is entitled, "Scientific Foundations," and clearly delineates the scientific methodology used in the understanding of LDs. In the second and third editions, evidence is presented to support a multiple-deficit framework



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for understanding LDs, because “Science has changed our thinking about LDs.” The accumulation of converging evidence—including recent scientific advances in the areas of genetics, brain mechanisms, neuroimaging, and neuropsychology—is described to support this change from the single-deficit model proposed in the first edition.

Chapter topics include development of LDs; etiology of LDs; brain mechanisms of LDs; neuropsychological constructs; comorbidity; specific learning disorders: DSM-5 and beyond; evidence-based practices in assessment; and understanding achievement gaps. The authors rightly conclude that given a multiple-deficit model of LDs and the prevalence of comorbidity, research on LDs must be multidisciplinary.

The chapter on achievement gaps is interesting and powerful, providing nuanced discussion of the evidence concerning achievement gaps or group differences. The authors contrast achievement gaps with LDs, a subset of neurodevelopmental disorders with LDs defined as ‘individual differences found within all groups.’ After presenting evidence on achievement gaps, the authors conclude that they are real and state that we know much about how to close these gaps. They close with a call to action, saying, “Like health and wealth gaps, achievement gaps are likely pointing to inequalities imbedded in our society. If we are committed to equal opportunity and

“ Like health and wealth gaps, achievement gaps are likely pointing to inequalities imbedded in our society. If we are committed to equal opportunity and social justice, we must try to close achievement gaps, just as we try to eliminate other inequalities in our society. ”

social justice, we must try to close achievement gaps, just as we try to eliminate other inequalities in our society.”

Part II: Review of Disorders

In Part II, “Review of Disorders,” each LD is discussed in detail, including a history of research in the field, definition, prevalence, developmental neuropsychology, brain mechanism, and etiology. Disorders covered in this volume include speech and language disorders, reading disability/dyslexia, mathematics disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disability. Case studies are presented in each chapter to give examples. Case studies include information about referral concerns; birth, development, health, and family histories; school history; assessment results; and recommendations for treatment.

At the end of each chapter, a Summary Table is presented, reviewing evidence and key information under the following topics: definition; prevalence and epidemiology; developmental neuropsychology; brain

mechanism; etiology; diagnosis; and treatment. The Summary Table is very useful for all who want a clear compilation of the extensive information presented on each LD.

Members of The International Dyslexia Association, together with those interested in literacy skill development and the prevalence of reading problems, will be particularly drawn to the chapter on reading disability, RD/dyslexia. As the best understood LD, RD/dyslexia is covered extensively. The authors define RD/dyslexia as ‘slow and inaccurate single word reading’ almost always ‘associated with poor spelling.’ Three definitions of RD/dyslexia are cited: “an expert consensus statement” (IDA definition, 2003); “the legal definition used in Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (known as IDEA 2004); and the definition in the most recent version of DSM (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association; 2013).”

Pennington, McGrath, and Peterson write, “We use the terms *dyslexia* and *reading disability* interchangeably throughout this book,” to eliminate confusion and to help parents, teachers, and others understand that impairments

in reading accuracy, reading fluency, and/or spelling constitute RD/dyslexia. Use of different terms can cause misunderstandings; specifically, IDEA 2004 uses Specific Learning Disability in Reading, which includes dyslexia and DSM-5 uses the term Learning Disorder and mentions dyslexia.

“We use the terms dyslexia and reading disability interchangeably throughout this book,” to eliminate confusion and to help parents, teachers, and others understand that impairments in reading accuracy, reading fluency, and/or spelling constitute RD/dyslexia.

The authors give examples of how many, including professionals, can be confused. They may mistakenly think that if a word reading, reading fluency, and/or spelling disorder is called by a different name, it is a different disorder. As an example, the authors describe the unfortunate and all too common situation whereby psychologists and teachers identify and diagnose a Learning Disability in Reading and/or Written Language, but do not use the word dyslexia. This causes misunderstanding that affects professionals, parents, and students. Treatment for RD/dyslexia consists of intensive, explicit instruction in components of reading instruction provided in a one-to-one or small group setting daily, or several times per week.

The authors conclude, “Early intervention for RD/dyslexia is an important public health goal.”

The authors begin with these practical goals: to “make the emerging science of learning disorders accessible to practitioners who help children with learning disorders,” as well as to “show concretely how science informs practice by thoroughly presenting actual examples of diagnosis and treatment planning.” In this outstanding volume, the authors have exceeded their stated goals.



Susan C. Lowell, M.A., is Adjunct Professor in the graduate school at Bay Path University, and director of Reading and Literacy Clinic in CT. Ms. Lowell served as a past Vice President of IDA, Chair of the IDA Global Partners Program, and past President of the NC Branch of IDA. A Fulbright Senior Scholar and Professor, Ms. Lowell has also served as an Associate to the Office of Overseas Schools for the U.S. Department of State as a reading specialist. She contributes to ‘Ask the Expert’ for the National Center on Improving Literacy. Ms. Lowell authored the IDA Fact Sheet ‘Dyslexia Assessment: What is it and Why is it Important?’ and co-authored the IDA book, *Basic Facts on Assessment of Dyslexia: Testing for Teaching*.

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MEMORIAL

Tributes to Earl B. Oremus: *Fierce Champion of Students with Learning Differences*

As the remarks below attest, Earl B. Oremus made important contributions to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), to the field, and to countless lives. These remarks are excerpted from Carolyn D. Cowen's tribute to Earl Oremus at his memorial celebration and from Leslie Oremus Buford's speech as she accepted the "Most Inspirational Award" on Earl's behalf from the Central Ohio Branch of IDA. Also see the beautiful obituary by Will Oremus, [here](#). Take a moment to be inspired by Earl's spirit and body of work ... and pass the inspiration on!



Carolyn D. Cowen's Excerpted (and updated) Remarks (February 29, 2020, Marburn Academy)

Earl Oremus loved to tell a good story. He was a *born* storyteller! It was how he processed the world, how he imparted knowledge and wisdom, and how he communed with those he loved. If there happened to be a little good bourbon around to loosen his tongue, well, Earl's storytelling just got bigger and better.

In that spirit, I want to tell the story of the very last story Earl Oremus told me. But before I do, let's widen the aperture to consider another important side of Earl—his remarkable body of work and achievement on behalf of students who struggle with learning differences.

This work goes well beyond his extraordinary twenty-seven years of leadership as Head of School at his beloved [Marburn Academy](#), where he was named Headmaster Emeritus upon his retirement. Early in his career, Earl took up the baton from other pioneers in the field (important mentors in his life, such as Don Hollingsworth, Dr. Edwin Cole, and Alice Garside) and began tilling the soil to improve the teaching-learning landscape for kids who learn differently.

This work spanned a vast array of educational institutions and organizations:

- From **Sayer School** to **Mass. General Hospital** and **Carroll School**
- From **St. Georges Summer**

School to Harvard Graduate School of Education

- From **Purnell School** to the **Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)**
- From the **LD Network** to **Lexia** and **Research Institute for Learning & Development**
- From **IDA's Head-of-Schools Symposia** to the **Independent LD School Leadership Summits** in Cambridge
- From the **Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS)** and **Ohio Association of Independent Schools (OAIS)** to the **National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)**
- From the founding of the **Central Ohio Branch of IDA** to the founding of the **Children's Dyslexia Center** in Columbus.

Earl tilled the soil by teaching, training, mentoring, coaching, leading, advocating, organizing, championing, cajoling, speaking, writing, and inspiring. As his dear friend and colleague, Lou Salza (retired Head of Lawrence School), says, "Earl helped craft language now enshrined in Ohio law that protects students with learning differences, and his early spadework led to the Ohio Literacy Initiative." Earl also convinced the Ohio Board of Regents to set requirements for future teachers aligned with IDA's knowledge and practice standards. All this was hard work, but Earl loved it and it paid off.

Earl did indeed improve the teaching-learning landscape, actually, for all kids, but especially for vulnerable learners. His harvest has been bountiful—generations of countless lives enriched immeasurably by Earl's body of work. These lives are his legacy.

While Earl's impact is beyond calculation, one wonderful measure is that on February 3, Earl became the first recipient (posthumously) of the inaugural "Most Inspirational Award" from the [Central Ohio Branch of The International Dyslexia Association](#) at the [Inaugural Ohio Summit on Dyslexia](#). (His daughter, [Leslie Buford](#), who teaches at Marburn, accepted on his behalf. See her remarks below.) This award is given to an outstanding individual who "embodies a commitment to principled action and dedication to making progress for individuals with dyslexia."

They couldn't have chosen a

more fitting inaugural recipient of the "Most Inspirational Award" than Earl Oremus!

And this is a good segue back to where I began—I promised you a story about an Earl Oremus story, the very last one he told me. In this story, we can see Earl, the inspiring educator, very much alive. He told it over the phone last summer while his family gathered for a beach vacation. It began with the show-stopping statement, "Well, I finally figured out the meaning of life."

Now, unless it's a weird guy on some street corner, when someone says, "I've figured out the meaning of life," you tend to stop and listen, especially if it's a close friend. *Heck, yeah, I wanted to know the meaning of life! Who doesn't?* I knew that coming to terms with his illness had plunged Earl into some tricky, "dark-nights-of-the-soul." Now, though, it sounded like he'd been to the mountaintop, so to speak. I figured he had something important to tell me and he had my undivided attention.

Ah, but Earl didn't surrender this pearl of wisdom about the meaning of life immediately. There was a story to be told. Like many of his tales, this one was "shaggy dog" in nature. It was long and rambling. Along the way, we took amusing side trips and forays along the highways and byways of various absorbing tangents and captivating digressions.

Over the years, I've learned to listen to Earl's stories patiently. He tells a good yarn in his own

good time, well seasoned with equal measures of hilarity and wisdom, sprinkled with a dash of mischievous irreverence. This time was no different ... *except, that I'd been promised the meaning of life* and was eager to arrive at that destination. I wanted the deliverable! But, no, Earl was not to be hurried. In spite of my hints about cutting to the chase and family in the background reminding him it was almost mealtime, Earl took his sweet time.

Finally, at long last, he came to the part of his story when he was ready to divulge the meaning of life ... and I've shamelessly done my best to instill in you the heightened sense of anticipation and, well, *impatience* I felt at the time. Are you ready to hear what Earl said was the meaning of life? Here it is.

"When it comes down to pondering the last few innings of your life, nothing else matters except the threads—the meaningful and loving connections—we weave with the special people in our lives. And, when we actually come to the end of our lives, nothing else matters except the richness of the tapestries we've woven with those we love."

Something about the way Earl said this gave his message great power and even though it was a warm summer day, I remember shivering a little. Ever the inspiring educator, Earl was sharing what he'd learned about the meaning of life as he played his final innings and made a courageous bid for overtime. He wanted to make sure we

all—his family and friends—paid attention to what he'd learned. I think we did.

Earl Oremus loved to tell a good story, and this story—the very last one he told me—was his best.

Earl, I know your own life tapestry brought you great joy, especially during your final innings. Deservedly so! It's beautiful. The warp is strong, reflecting the principled foundations of your larger-than-life character. The weft is intricately woven with the loving threads of your family and friends. But most importantly, Earl, your generous heart and lively spirit are abundantly woven into the tapestries of all of our lives, too.

Happy storytelling, dear friend!

Leslie Oremus Buford's Excerpted Remarks Upon Accepting the "Most

Inspirational Award" from Central Ohio Branch of IDA for Earl B. Oremus (February 3, 2020, Inaugural Ohio Summit on Dyslexia)

I asked myself, if Dad were here, what would he say? I know that the first thing he would do is to stand here and look out at this amazing gathering of people and say that it is a dream come true. And the next thing he would do would be to give you an etymology lesson, so I'm going to do that.

Inspiration, from the verb "Inspire," literally means to breathe life into. *Spire*, breath, is from the PIE root that also gives us "spirit." It's hard to imagine a more spirited person than Earl. He breathed life into everything he did.

As I thought about it today, it occurred to me that inspiration is not a simple transaction from

one person to another. It's more like a flow, like the air we breathe and pass on. Something that comes from one source and flows through you, and if it is handled well, it is passed on to many other people, and so on. And that's what Dad's done.

The fact that you are all here shows that you are engaged in this fight with us and that the inspiration that started with Earl coming to Ohio is now yours; it's ours. It's our job to make sure that it keeps flowing, through us, to inspire us to achieve our goals. My question to you is, how will you breathe life into this cause? Learning, advocacy, activism, training, teaching, tutoring? Contribute to the [IDA](#), the [Children's Dyslexia Centers](#), or the [Earl Oremus Inspiration Fund at Marburn](#) .

Do what you can. Stay a part of it. Pass the inspiration on.



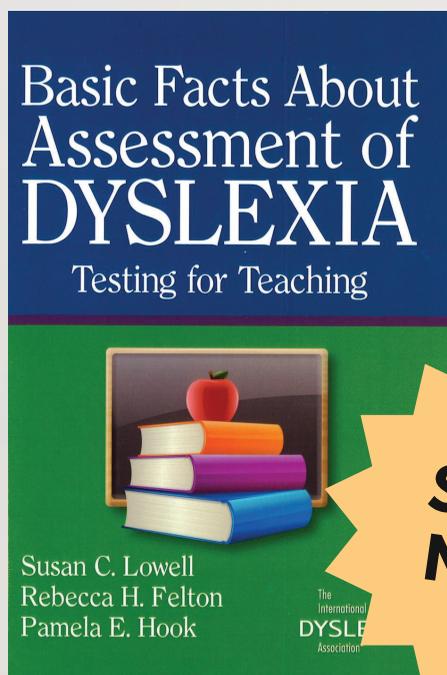
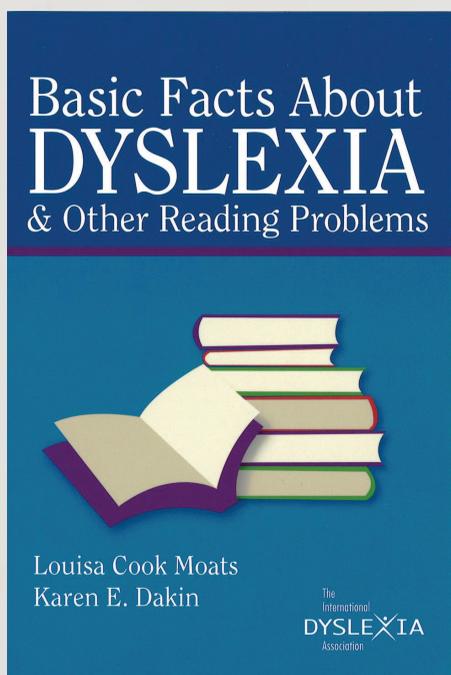
Leslie O. Buford, CS/FIT OGA, serves on the Board of Directors of the International Dyslexia Association Central Ohio Branch. She has worn many hats at Marburn Academy, including Language Arts and Theatre teacher, OG Tutor, Tutoring Program Coordinator and Supervisor, and Director of Curriculum. Currently, Leslie serves as the Supervisor of Orton-Gillingham Remediation for the school program at Marburn Academy. There is no way to express the depth of her gratitude for the opportunity to work side by side with her father for 29 years, and for the beautiful tapestry he wove in this community.

Carolyn D. Cowen, Ed.M., serves on the Board of Directors of the International Dyslexia Association and as Executive Editor-in-Chief of IDA's Editorial Boards. She also serves on the Board of Directors of the Research Institute for Learning and Development. Carolyn has worn many hats in her 40 years of working in education and nonprofits; currently she is a communications strategist. Carolyn is especially interested in harnessing the power of digital media to make complex information accessible and actionable for the spectrum of decision-makers working for change on behalf of those with dyslexia and learning differences. Follow her on Twitter @cdc Bowen.



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