

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Georgia and Massachusetts Advance Dyslexia Screening and Intervention

By Joseph Hedger

State boards of education are well placed to advocate for more young children to be screened for dyslexia, a disability that by some measures affects up to 20 percent of the U.S. population.¹ Boards can also ensure that identified students receive effective interventions, as those in Massachusetts and Georgia have done. Board members collaborated with state officials, practitioners, and experts to develop multipronged early screening and intervention policies.

Misdiagnoses of dyslexia and diagnoses that are missed entirely are common, partly because reading ability and disability are on a continuum, according to researcher Richard K. Wagner.² Some laws and practices for screening and intervention exclude or neglect many struggling readers, resulting in disproportionate underdiagnosis in children of color and children in poverty.³

MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts recently took steps to increase access to screening and to vet the tools districts use to identify students with dyslexia. In 2020, the state's Early Reading Expert Panel released guidelines on selecting and implementing universal screening tools for dyslexia, targeted reading interventions, progress monitoring, considerations for English learners and special education students, and the role of multitiered systems of support for screening and providing appropriate instruction.⁴

Yet having only guidelines came with drawbacks, according to state board member

Michael Moriarty. "[I]n Massachusetts, which is a heavily local-controlled state, any district is free to completely ignore whatever they want unless you do have some regulatory compliance behind it," he said.

Recognizing the need for further steps, then Secretary of Education James Peyser proposed amending the Massachusetts board's special education regulations to require a twice-annual screening of K-3 students using state-approved instruments. The updated rule also required prompt parent or guardian notification of assessment results. The board approved this regulation in September 2022, and it becomes effective in July 2023.⁵

Requiring universal screening and notification has an equity benefit as well, Moriarty said. The new rules address the variation in screening practice from one district to the next and eliminate inequities based on resources or educator knowledge and turnover. Plus, the requirement ensures that all families are notified when their children are identified as having dyslexia and provided resources to mitigate it. Typically, White middle class or wealthier families with highly educated parents or guardians tend to be the strongest advocates for their children with dyslexia, Moriarty said.

"Engaging and informing parents is at the heart of how you're going to get a good outcome here," he added. "That to me is the heart of the equity problem: The haves can do something, and the have-nots' children remain illiterate."

Strong state-level vetting for screening tools is also important, he said. "[For] any manner

of product that a school district needs to consider, we should have as our state lever some sort of Seal of Good Housekeeping. People can't be developing their own screenings. That's too complex a task," Moriarty said.

GEORGIA

In May 2019, Georgia's Gov. Brian Kemp signed into law Senate Bill 48, which dealt with identification and support of children with dyslexia. The bill required the university system to develop and offer educators a dyslexia course of study, the professional standards committee to create rules for a dyslexia endorsement, and the state education agency to develop a handbook and a pilot for hands-on dyslexia support to school districts. Finally, the Georgia State Board of Education was to develop and adopt a stand-alone rule for identification and support of children with dyslexia.

While the board's task was to translate the law into a rule, members knew the task was not simple. With help from Decoding Dyslexia Georgia and other state organizations, they convened a study committee of 26 experts and practitioners to inform the state education agency on the draft rule. Stephen Pruitt, president of the Southern Regional Education Board, facilitated the meetings. He "knew how a rule should model a law," said Helen Odom Rice, a state board member.

These meetings outlined five key parts of the rule: a definition and characteristics of dyslexia and related disorders, a process for referring K-3 students to dyslexia screening, a process for monitoring the screening process, qualified screening tools, and a parent consent process, Rice said.

“The tools that are needed to teach our [dyslexic] kids to read [were] in the law, but in the bubbling up and peeling back of this onion, we discovered that this is what all kids needed,” Rice said. “If you have something that is systematic and threaded through all those components, kids are going to learn to read.”

“The mind-set has now moved beyond just the [2019] bill,” added board member Kenneth Mason. “Now there is an entry point for all students to learn in the state, because there’s a more intentional early warning system and safety net designed to be supportive and informative to all families about the process of reading and learning, no matter who your young person is or where they are.”

The board adopted the rule in August 2022. The rule requires universal screening for all K-3 students for characteristics of dyslexia beginning in the 2024–25 school year; academic interventions for students identified with dyslexia or other disorders, including progress monitoring at least once a month and implementation of evidence-based practices set out in the Georgia Dyslexia Informational Handbook; parental consent and support; and data reporting to the state education agency.⁶

“There are going to be ongoing budget considerations because of the professional development needed to sustain this work. . . . In real ways, every school has to go through a [shift in] transformation and understanding, and that’s done best if we invest in professional learning,” Mason said.

Literacy coaching is also vital, added Tina Engberg, state leader of Decoding Dyslexia Georgia and ongoing partner in the state board’s work. “It’s a surmountable thing,” she said. “There are teachers doing this well. It’s going to take time to get more teachers doing this well.”

More recent state legislation—including a comprehensive literacy bill passed in March 2023—is keeping literacy at the forefront of the state board’s agenda, as are the commitment and advocacy of its members.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

States setting policies to improve dyslexia identification and intervention should consider

several factors. They can require or recommend universal screenings for dyslexia and other reading disabilities, support professional development opportunities, and incorporate family notification and ongoing support. Forty states plus the District of Columbia require screening for dyslexia and other reading disabilities. Only 21 of those also require parents to be notified, according to the National Center on Improving Literacy.⁷

Screening rules should address what ages children are when they are screened (typically in grades K-3) and how often screening is administered. Rules should be developed in partnership with researchers, practitioners, and family members and caretakers. In its model policy toolkit, think tank ExcelinEd suggests at least annual screenings for K-2 students. They also recommend that the state board approve screeners that, as developmentally appropriate, assess phonological and phonemic awareness; sound symbol recognition; alphabet knowledge; decoding skills; rapid naming skills; encoding skills; and oral reading fluency.⁸

A report from the National Center on Improving Literacy suggests leaning on research-practitioner partnerships in selecting the right screeners. Many factors weigh in this selection: local context and characteristics of students in the school as compared with the screener validation study; the scope of assessment related to the screening needs in the school; and statistical considerations of reliability, validity, and accuracy of the classification of a reading difficulty.⁹

Intervention works best when implemented in earlier grades. In a 2017 study by Maureen Lovett et al., children with reading disabilities who received evidence-based reading intervention in first and second grade made gains in foundational reading skills at almost twice the rate of children receiving intervention only in third grade, and first graders continued to grow at faster rates over successive years than did students for whom intervention began in second grade.¹⁰

In its 2000 report, the National Reading Panel outlined benefits of systematic instruction in the five pillars of what is often termed the science of reading: phonemic awareness,

phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The benefits extend to all students but are especially critical for children with reading difficulties and disabilities.¹¹ Early recognition of warning signs, well-targeted screening and assessment, effective intervention, and ongoing monitoring of progress are all critical to the ongoing success of students with learning disabilities.¹²

“Dyslexia is a very complex topic,” said Decoding Dyslexia Georgia’s Engberg. “That’s what keeps me coming back to the state board meetings. As long as we keep making literacy top of mind, we will keep moving forward.”

Joseph Hedger is NASBE’s associate editor.

NOTES

1 Richard K. Wagner et al., “The Prevalence of Dyslexia: A New Approach to its Estimation,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 53, no. 5 (2020).

2 Richard K. Wagner, “Why Is It So Difficult to Diagnose Dyslexia and How Can We Do It Better?” *The Examiner* 7, no. 15 (2018).

3 Kalman R. Hettleman, “The Invisible Dyslexics: How Public School Systems in Baltimore and Elsewhere Discriminate against Poor Children in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Early Reading Difficulties” (Baltimore: The Abell Foundation, 2003); Brian Gearin et al., “Document Analysis of State Dyslexia Legislation Suggests Likely Heterogenous Effects on Student and School Outcomes,” *Learning Disability Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2021).

4 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines” (Malden, MA, January 2020), <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/dyslexia-guidelines.pdf>. The panel was created by a 2012 law to ensure students learned to read by grade 3.

5 Early Literacy Screening, 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f).

6 Dyslexia Identification and Support, Ga. Comp. R. & Regs. Rule 160-4-2-.39.

7 National Center on Improving Literacy, “State of Dyslexia,” web page (Washington, DC: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, N.d.), <https://improvingliteracy.org/state-of-dyslexia>.

8 ExcelinEd, “Identifying and Supporting Students with Characteristics of Dyslexia: Model Policy” (Tallahassee, FL, 2023).

9 Yaacov Petscher et al., “Screening for Dyslexia” (Washington, DC: National Center on Improving Literacy, 2019).

10 Maureen Lovett et al., “Early Intervention for Children at Risk for Reading Disabilities: The Impact of Grade at Intervention and Individual Differences on Intervention Outcomes,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 109, no. 7 (2017): 889–914.

11 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, “Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read,” 00-4754 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

12 National Center for Learning Disabilities, “Early Detection of Learning Difficulties: From ‘Recognizing Risk’ to ‘Responding Rapidly’ ” (Washington, DC, 2020).

STATE INNOVATIONS are published by the National Association of State Boards of Education, 123 N. Pitt Street, Suite 350, Alexandria, VA 22314 • 703.684.4000 • www.nasbe.org. Paolo DeMaria, president and CEO. Valerie Norville, editorial director. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. Opinions and views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NASBE, its members, or its sponsors.

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