

Specific Learning Disability/Dyslexia Frequently Asked Questions

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2626&q=322672#Elig>

1. What is “Dyslexia?”

CSDE Working Definition of Dyslexia*

Dyslexia is included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) as a specific learning disability (SLD). Dyslexia impacts reading, specifically decoding and accurate and/or fluent word recognition and spelling. Dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and is unexpected and/or inconsistent with a student’s other abilities often despite the provision of appropriate instruction. Dyslexia results from a significant deficit in phonological processing (i.e., a persistent difficulty in the awareness of and ability to manipulate the individual sounds of spoken language).

Typically, students with dyslexia have strengths and cognitive abilities in areas such as reasoning, critical thinking, concept formation, problem solving, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and social communication (e.g., conversation). Early identification and appropriate instruction targeting the underlying phonological processing deficits that characterize dyslexia may minimize its educational impact.

Essential Clarifications

- ✓ Dyslexia is not *primarily* the result of visual, hearing, or motor disability; an intellectual disability; emotional disturbance; a lack of appropriate instruction; cultural factors; environmental or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency.
- ✓ Early identification of the characteristics of dyslexia is critical, leading to focused, evidence-based interventions, accommodations, self-awareness, self-empowerment, and school and life success.
- ✓ Without targeted, systematic and explicit instruction/interventions along with accommodations (e.g., accessible educational materials in content area subjects), students with dyslexia may have:
 - reduced reading experiences that may impact the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge,
 - difficulty with written expression, and/or
 - difficulty learning a second language.
- ✓ Students with dyslexia may demonstrate additional behavioral and/or emotional reactions to their difficulty with learning to read.

*This working definition was developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) with input from an external stakeholder workgroup and is based on a review of applicable literature, the IDEA, and current definitions in use by other states, organizations and legislation.

2. Who can identify a child with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD)/Dyslexia?

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), upon completion of the administration of assessments and other evaluation measures, a group of qualified professionals and the parent of the child (planning and placement team (PPT) in Connecticut) determines whether the child is a child with a disability and the educational needs of the child. IDEA requires that professionals who administer assessment tools and strategies to assist in the identification of a child as having SLD/Dyslexia must be trained and knowledgeable regarding such assessments. As defined in IDEA 2004, a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) includes conditions such as dyslexia. Definitions of dyslexia vary, but all propose that dyslexia is a learning disability that impacts the area of reading. Since the PPT must provide assessments in all areas of suspected disability, for a child who is suspected of having SLD/Dyslexia, professionals with expertise in reading would be critical team members, as well as those with considerable knowledge in other areas of concern (e.g., language, mathematics, writing). While other professionals with a more clinical background may specialize in identifying and providing remediation for individuals with dyslexia, IDEA does not indicate that there is one type of professional who is uniquely qualified to provide such identification.

3. What is an appropriate evaluation for a child suspected of having SLD/Dyslexia?

To help ensure that an evaluation is appropriate (i.e., consistent with the requirements of IDEA), the PPT must first gather input from multiple sources (e.g., families, general education classroom, curriculum-based measures, standardized assessments, student records, observations) and include a review of existing evaluation data to determine what additional data, if any, are needed to identify a learning disability, a student's need for special education, and write an IEP. Included in this review must be any evaluative data gathered during a scientific research-based intervention process as well as other academic and behavioral data that can be used to rule out that the student's learning difficulties are due to a lack of appropriate instruction. In Connecticut this process is called Scientific Research Based Intervention (SRBI) (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2010).

When planning the evaluation, the PPT must: 1) use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental and academic information about the student, including information provided by the parents; 2) not use any single measure or assessment as the sole criterion for determining whether the student is a student with a disability; 3) use technically sound (i.e., valid and reliable) instruments that may assess the relative contribution of cognitive and behavioral factors in addition to physical or developmental factors; 4) use assessments that are tailored to assess areas of specific educational need and not merely those that are designed to provide a general intelligence quotient; 5) assess a student in all areas related to the suspected disability; and 6) use measures that are sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of a student's special, education and related service needs. When determining whether a student has a learning disability, the PPT must ensure the student is observed in her or his learning environment, including the general education classroom, to document the student's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty.

Dyslexia is a distinct type of learning disability associated with reading difficulties in accurate and fluent single word decoding skills associated with poor phonological processing and rapid naming abilities. Therefore, in addition to other areas of concern, assessment of children suspected of having SLD/Dyslexia should address the five critical components of reading recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

4. Is a child identified with SLD/Dyslexia automatically eligible for special education services?

A child identified with SLD/Dyslexia may or may not be eligible for special education services. A child is not considered to be eligible for special education under IDEA 2004 unless the child has a disability and, as a result, needs special education and related services. Therefore, in addition to meeting the criteria for a learning disability, in order for a student to be eligible for services under IDEA 2004, the PPT must determine that the student's learning difficulties require specially designed instruction. Some students with SLD/Dyslexia may need accommodations or related services in order to benefit from the same instruction as their peers; however, they may not need specialized instruction and, therefore, would not be eligible for special education services.

5. What is appropriate specialized instruction for a student with SLD/Dyslexia?

As with any child who is receiving special education services, all instruction must be individualized. Each child will have a different profile of strengths and areas of concern, thus there is no one best method of instruction or intervention for each child with SLD/Dyslexia. However, there is a great deal of evidence-based research supporting structured literacy instructional approaches as successful methods for working with students with SLD/Dyslexia. These instructional approaches differ in specific techniques and materials, but they all include structured, explicit, systematic, cumulative instruction designed to promote understanding, memory, recall, and use of spoken and written language. They also have multiple components that focus on such areas of instruction as phonological skills, phonics and word analysis, spelling, word recognition and oral reading fluency, grammar and syntax, text comprehension, writing, and study skills.

6. What is *Structured Literacy* instruction?

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) has adopted the term *Structured Literacy* to describe explicit reading instruction that goes by many names (Orton-Gillingham, Multi-Sensory, Explicit Phonics and others such as Wilson Language Training Program, Lindamood Bell Instruction). Structured Literacy instruction prepares students to decode words in an explicit and systematic manner. This approach not only helps students with SLD/Dyslexia, but there is substantial evidence that it is more effective for *all* readers.

Structured Literacy instruction is marked by several elements:

- ◆ **Phonology/Phonological Awareness** – Phonology is the study of sound structure of spoken words and is a critical element of *Structured Language* instruction. Phonological awareness includes rhyming, counting words in spoken sentence, and clapping syllables in spoken words. An important aspect of phonological awareness is **phonemic awareness** or the ability to segment words into their component sounds, which are called phonemes.
- ◆ **Sound-Symbol Association/Phonics** – Once students have developed the awareness of phonemes of spoken language, they must learn how to map the phonemes to symbols or printed letters, blend sounds and letters into words and segment words into individual sounds. Sound-symbol association must be taught and mastered in two directions: visual to auditory (reading) and auditory to visual (spelling). The instruction of sound-symbol associations is often referred to as **phonics**.

- ◆ **Syllable Instruction** – A syllable is a unit of oral or written language with one vowel sound. Instruction includes teaching of the six basic syllable types in the English language: closed, vowel-consonant-*e*, open, consonant-*le*, *r*-controlled, and vowel pair. Knowledge of syllable types assists readers to determine the sound of the vowel in the syllable. Syllable division rules heighten the reader’s awareness of where a long, unfamiliar word may be divided for greater accuracy in reading or sounding out a word.
- ◆ **Morphology** – A **morpheme** is the smallest unit of meaning in the language. A structured literacy curriculum includes the study of vocabulary, including base words, roots, prefixes, and suffixes.
- ◆ **Syntax** – Syntax is the set of principles that dictate the sequence and function of words in a sentence in order to convey meaning. This includes grammar, sentence variation, and the mechanics of language.
- ◆ **Semantics** – Semantics is that aspect of language concerned with meaning. The curriculum (from the beginning) must include instruction in the comprehension of written language.

Structured Literacy is distinctive in the principles that guide how critical elements are taught.

Systematic and Cumulative – *Structured Literacy* instruction is systematic and cumulative. **Systematic** means that the organization of material follows the logical order of the language. The sequence must begin with the easiest and most basic concepts and elements and progress methodically to more difficult concepts and elements. **Cumulative** means each step must be based on concepts previously learned.

Explicit Instruction – *Structured Literacy* instruction requires the deliberate teaching of all concepts with continuous student-teacher interaction. It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce these concepts on their own.

Diagnostic Teaching – The teacher must be adept at individualized instruction. That is instruction that meets a specific student’s needs. The instruction is based on careful and continuous assessment, both informally (e.g., observation) and formally (e.g., using standardized measures through progress monitoring). The content presented must be mastered to the degree of automaticity. Automaticity is critical to freeing all the student’s attention and cognitive resources for comprehension and expression (IDA, 2015).

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CSDE has developed a SLD/Dyslexia Workgroup that will compile evidence-based practices for the screening, identification, and instruction of students with SLD/Dyslexia. For additional information the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) has developed a variety of fact sheets, such as *Effective Reading Instruction for Students with Dyslexia* and *Dyslexia Assessment: What Is It and How Can It Help?*, that can be found at: <http://www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/MSL2007finalR1.pdf>.

Further information from the *What Works Clearinghouse/Literacy* can be accessed at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Topic.aspx?sid=8>.

The IDA also has developed *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading* (2010) at <http://www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/KPS3-1-12.pdf>.

References:

- Connecticut State Department of Education. (2010). Guidelines for Identifying Children with Learning Disabilities. Hartford, CT.
- International Dyslexia Association (IDA). (2015). *Effective Reading Instruction for Students with Dyslexia*. Baltimore, MD: IDA.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health.

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For additional information and resources, go to the Specific Learning Disabilities/Dyslexia Initiative on the SERC website:

<http://www.ctserc.org/index.php/dyslexia>