Early detection of dyslexia is crucial for reading success
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Teachers don’t yet have the skills they need

Just under six years ago, the Connecticut Office of Legislative Research published a report on the status of dyslexia under the state’s special education laws.¹ In January 2015, it became legal for a Planning and Placement Team to diagnose and label a special-education student under the category of Specific Learning Disability/Dyslexia. In that year, many teachers, myself included, had little to no knowledge of how to screen for and assess dyslexia, notice its symptoms, and provide specially designed instruction to a dyslexic student. Yet the International Dyslexia Association estimates that as many as 1 in 5 people worldwide may have some symptoms of dyslexia. If Connecticut serves over half a million students each year, that translates to over 100,000 students who may show a reading-based learning disability or related deficits. Those that don’t qualify for special education services will struggle to keep up with their peers.

Not until 2017 did our state pass legislation requiring teachers applying for special education certification to complete a “program of study in the diagnosis and remediation of reading and language arts that includes...instruction in the detection and recognition of, and evidence-based structured literacy interventions for, students with dyslexia.”² Last year, Connecticut established a task force to analyze the implementation of our dyslexia-related laws. We can and need to do so much more.

Current state-wide screening requirements

There exist appropriate, state-approved screenings that will help educators look for early signs of dyslexia as young as kindergarten age. However, these screenings are not required across the state. According to the State Performance Office website, schools and districts are free to choose whether they universally screen students for things like phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, and oral reading fluency. It is important to point out that a kindergarten student who has not been through a universal screening process in her school might not be screened for reading difficulties until she has already failed to hit the benchmark. With required universal screenings, all students would be evaluated for a potential reading difficulty before they begin to lag behind their peers.

Universal screenings will prevent students from falling through the cracks

Universal screening should begin as early as kindergarten and should include English Language Learners. The National Institutes of Health has found that dyslexia can be detected

² An Act Requiring Special Education Teachers To Complete A Program Of Study In Evidence-based Structured Literacy Interventions For Students With Dyslexia. 2017.
as early as age 5 ½, with a 92% accuracy rate.\textsuperscript{3} In my teaching career, I have personally diagnosed students much older, who had developed coping skills around their reading difficulties, so that their dyslexia was not detected until middle school. It is not generally contested that students who receive intervention earlier will be able to “close the gap” faster than those who receive it later in their academic career. In my own six years’ of experience as a Certified Dyslexia Practitioner, I have seen time and again that younger students tend to make significantly more progress in a shorter period of time than older students working on the same concepts.

There is not one assessment tool that covers all of the necessary areas. However, screening measures in kindergarten should include phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness (segmentation, blending, rapid automatic naming of letters and other symbols, letter-sound correspondence, and phonological memory, including non-word repetition). In first grade, the screening should add word-recognition fluency (both accuracy and rate), and oral reading fluency can be added midway through the school year. Some state-approved tests that can screen for these indexes are the CORE, the DIBELS/Oral Reading Fluency, and aimsWeb.

Further Recommended Reading:

