

October is Dyslexia Awareness Month

The Power of Parents Behind #SayDyslexia

How American Schools Fail Students with Dyslexia

"There are proven ways to help people with dyslexia learn to read, and a federal law that's supposed to ensure schools provide kids with help. But across the country, public schools are denying children proper treatment and often failing to identify them with dyslexia in the first place." So reads the lead in to reporter Emily Hanford's fall 2017 American Public Media Educate [podcast](#), *Hard to Read. How American Schools Fail Students with Dyslexia*.



Some of the reasons for this systemic failure are the same as those Hanford reported in the American Public Media Educate [podcast](#), *Hard Words. Why aren't kids being taught to read?*, which we discussed last month. Many teachers don't know about evidence-based literacy instruction since it wasn't taught during their pre-service education. Other educators remain resistant to evidence-based practice, in spite of the science.

But children with SLD/Dyslexia face additional barriers to learning to read. Estimated to be 5 to 12% of American students, these struggling readers need *specialized* reading instruction, which is more expensive than, say, general "tier one" reading instruction. If schools "say dyslexia," they may be legally obligated to provide appropriate special education services. That appropriate instruction is not only costly to the student's public school system, it may also be difficult to find someone qualified to provide it. Why? For

the same reasons that general education teachers lack this knowledge. In order to fill the knowledge-to-practice gap, advanced practitioners of Structured Literacy* not only require the necessary coursework, but also additional hours of supervised, hands-on experience with students.

Thank You, Decoding Dyslexia!

Thanks to parent advocacy—especially the 50 state chapters of Decoding Dyslexia—many more states are passing dyslexia laws that not only require the identification and treatment of students with SLD/Dyslexia, but also the appropriate training of the teachers who service them. In Connecticut, we #SayDyslexia.

Passing SLD/Dyslexia legislation is not enough, however. "Accountability is still lacking, funding sparse and confusion widespread throughout U.S. schools about the reading disability," reports Hanford. "We have a really good screening law, but it's not being implemented with fidelity," said Allison Quirion, founder of Decoding Dyslexia Connecticut. "Many schools don't understand what's required of them."

What to Do if Your Child's School Isn't Teaching Reading Right?

So, what is a parent to do if they are unsure about the quality of their child's reading instruction? Ask! As a follow up to the two podcasts described above, reporter Hanson returned to the experts for answers. They provide many excellent recommendations.

- Be persistent. Talk to your child's teacher, principal, and the superintendent about the curriculum, materials, and instructional philosophy at the school. Is *Structured Literacy* offered?
- Understand the differences between Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR) and Whole Language approaches, as summarized on page 18 of this report. Remember that "Balanced Literacy is basically whole language with some phonics mixed in," per Tim Shanahan, a literacy expert who served on the National Reading Panel. He says, "What's wrong with Balanced Literacy is that it combines a whole bunch of things that don't work with a little bit of what does work, and that's not good reading instruction."
- Observe what your child does when s/he comes to an unknown word when reading. Does s/he try to sound out the word or merely guess?
- Examine your child's homework assignments. Are they learning to spell words with common patterns? Are they being asked to memorize long lists of sight words, rather than learning how to decode?
- You don't have to be a reading expert to help your child develop a rich vocabulary

and background knowledge, both of which are important contributors to reading comprehension.

- Keep reading with and to your child at home.
- Join with like-minded parents to facilitate change.

**Structured Literacy* instruction is the umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to unify and encompass evidence-based programs and approaches that are aligned to the [Knowledge and Practice Standards](#) and are effective for students identified with SLD/Dyslexia (most commonly known as Orton-Gillingham or Multisensory Structured Language).

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