

Screening for Dyslexia: Current Policy, Practices, and Emerging Research

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Abstract

Although 41 states have adopted dyslexia related legislation, with 21 including screening for dyslexia in early elementary school, states lack clear consensus regarding screening requirements, screening tools, and how to use scores to inform decisions^{1,2,3}. Additionally, balancing sensitivity and specificity in the screening process is values-based and context-dependent, making generalizations about best practice complicated³. The National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL), a U.S. Department of Education funded partnership seeks to improve knowledge of evidence-based approaches in screening, identifying, and supporting students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia. NCIL's recent white paper³ and literacy briefs^{4,5} provide guidance to inform dyslexia screening practices in school systems in light of current policy and practices and emerging research.

Trends in Dyslexia Policy and Practices

Recent policy and research have led to widespread agreement across state legislation in terms of what constructs should be measured in screening for dyslexia. However, there is a lack of uniformity across states due to state-level opposition to various elements of the dyslexia agenda.

States vary substantially in their requirements for selecting screening tools. Some name specific assessment systems (e.g., DIBELS, AIMSweb) or subtests, while others have developed their own screening tools. Recommendations for use of scores and balancing false negatives and false positives in screening results also differ. This lack of consensus in state-level policy makes generalizations regarding best practice in screening complicated.

Decision-Making Framework

The dyslexia screening process should answer several assessment questions. Data obtained should be linked to a framework for making educational decisions. A single assessment tool can address more than one question when administered at multiple time points.

Assessment Question	Assessment Type
Is the student at risk for dyslexia or for failing to meet important grade-level goals in reading?	Screening
Is the student's progress on track to meet important grade level goals and reach reading proficiency?	Progress Monitoring
Do the student's reading skills meet grade-level expectations?	Summative/General Outcome
What additional intervention approaches are most likely to increase the student's rate of improvement in reading?	Diagnostic

Screening data should be used to determine which students receive early literacy intervention. Whether the student's reading difficulties are caused by a literacy-related disability or some other underlying factor, providing intensive early intervention to address skill deficits is critical in preventing reading difficulties from increasing in severity over time.

Introduction: Trends in Dyslexia Policy and Practices

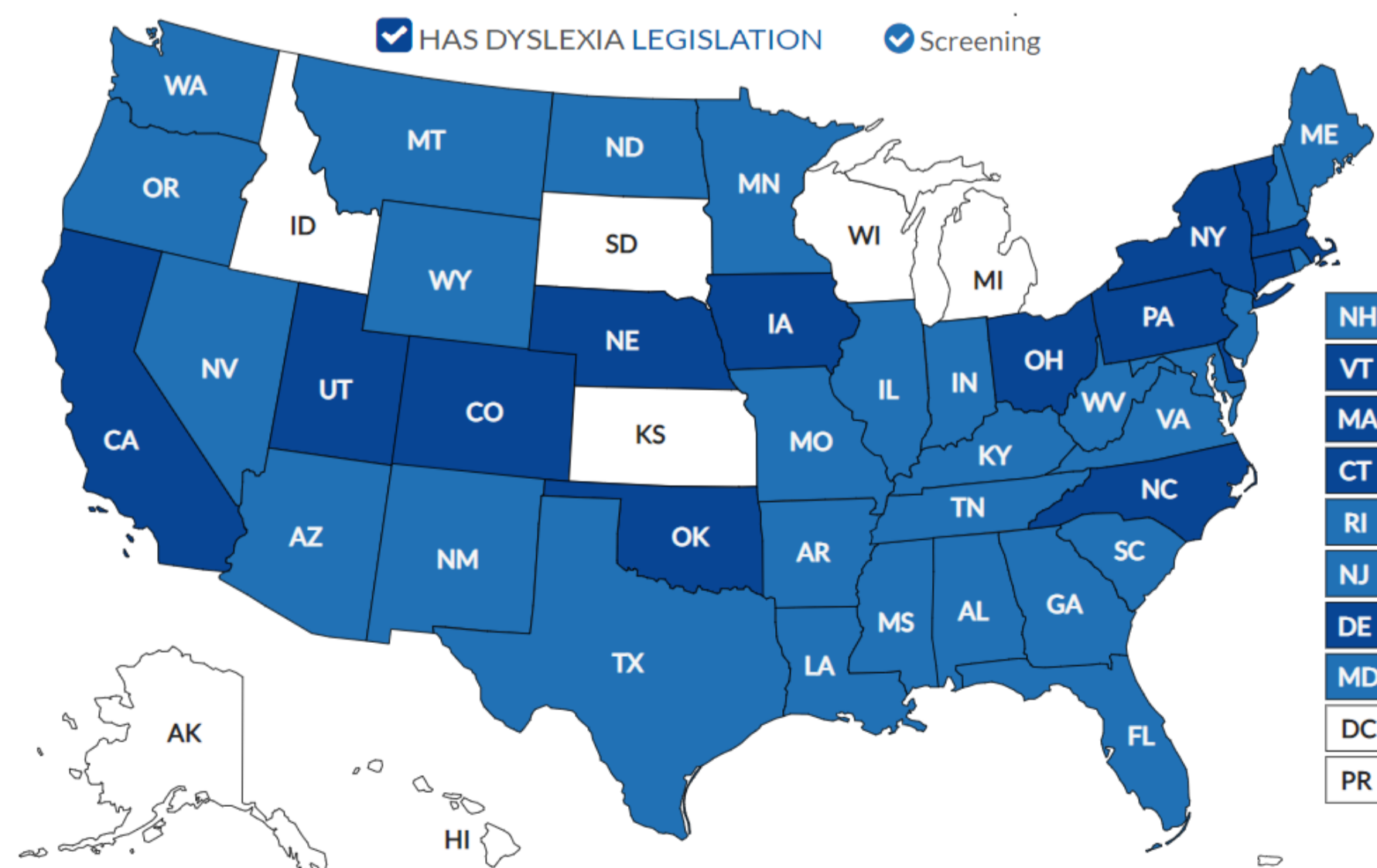
Despite historical barriers to the development of dyslexia legislation, sociopolitical factors such as parental and organizational advocacy, changing perceptions, and shifting research and practice standards converged in the early 2000s, creating widespread demand for dyslexia education reform that increased political interest in progressing the dyslexia agenda.

The dyslexia policy agenda objectives include promoting:

- A common definition of dyslexia (specifically, that of the International Dyslexia Association)
- Early intervention to prevent future reading difficulties
- Universal screening of elementary school students for risk of reading failure
- The use of evidence-based interventions in response to screening results

As a result, many states have adopted dyslexia legislation in recent years, with nearly half mandating universal screening for dyslexia risk. Short-term changes that have resulted from recent dyslexia legislation include:

- Greater focus on dyslexia screening and intervention in schools
- Increased use of MTSS and explicit instruction
- Changes in teacher preparation and training
- Increased attention to the neurological and behavioral bases of dyslexia



In addition, Congress' 2016 Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia (READ) Act prioritized funding for research on early identification of dyslexia, professional development for teachers and administrators, and the development of curricular tools.

Best Practices in Universal Screening for Dyslexia

In response to this nationwide lack of consistency in screening, NCIL is working to develop "best practice" guidelines for universal screening for dyslexia. NCIL's recent white paper integrates current practice and emerging research to provide practical steps toward implementing effective dyslexia screening.

Considerations for Evaluating and Selecting Screening Tools

- Brevity and ease of administration
- Contextual fit of screeners with the student population (consider developmental appropriateness, representation in norming sample)
- Assessment of key constructs related to reading success, with content relevant to assessment questions that provides a snapshot of current reading skills
- Adequate reliability and internal/external validity
- Accuracy in determining risk for dyslexia, balancing rates of false negatives and false positives
- High utility in instructional decision-making

BEST PRACTICES IN UNIVERSAL SCREENING

There is broad agreement that schools should implement early screening and intervention programs. State legislation generally favors the use of universal screening within schools across grades K-2, where students are screened annually to assess risk for dyslexia and other reading disabilities.

Schools should provide at least three levels of instructional support for students, based on their risk for poor overall reading proficiency:

- Core classroom instruction for students reading at or above grade level (i.e., low risk for reading problems)
- Moderate additional support for students reading somewhat below grade level expectations (i.e., moderate risk for reading problems)
- Intense additional support for students reading well below grade level expectations (i.e., high risk for reading problems)

When establishing a screening protocol consider...

1. the scope of the assessment, the reliability and validity of scores, and the classification accuracy of the screener relative to the specified outcome.
2. when and how the screening assessment(s) will be administered at frequent intervals.
3. who will be responsible for entering data into a database and printing reports immediately following each screening assessment.
4. holding primary grade level team meetings and upper grade cross-discipline team meetings after each school-wide screening to analyze the reports and determine placement and instructional grouping for each student.
5. how parents/families will be engaged in the decision-making and kept updated on their child's reading performance.

School districts should carefully consider and identify their respective personnel and resources available to follow these protocols.

Suggested Screening Tasks By Grade

Kindergarten

- Phonological awareness (e.g., segmentation, blending, onset and rime)
- Rapid automatized naming (e.g., letter naming fluency)
- Letter-sound correspondence
- Phonological memory

1st Grade

- Phonemic awareness (e.g., segmentation)
- Letter manipulation
- Non-word repetition
- Oral vocabulary
- Word reading fluency

2nd Grade

- Word identification (real and non-words)
- Oral reading fluency
- Reading comprehension

Final Considerations and Recommendations

Screeners are intended to assess risk for dyslexia and reading difficulty, not to diagnose. Screening should occur 2-3 times per year during early elementary school (grades K-3) and should inform decisions about needed intensity of instructional supports. The hope is that these recommendations and other NCIL resources will increase knowledge of best practices and inform dyslexia screening in school systems.

For More Information

Visit improvingliteracy.org to...

- Explore state-by-state policy variations on an interactive map
- View research briefs and infographics written by NCIL experts
- Access additional resources highlighting emerging research on dyslexia screening and tools to help implement best practices



Scan to view the white paper on screening for dyslexia.



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