



## STATUS OF DYSLEXIA UNDER SPECIAL EDUCATION LAWS

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### WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia is a neurological disorder that causes the brain to process and interpret information differently than people without the disorder. The National Center for Learning Disabilities defines dyslexia as a "language-based processing disorder" that can impair a student's ability to read; write; spell; and, in severe cases, speak. Dyslexia is not a sign of low intelligence or low motivation.

### QUESTIONS

1. Is dyslexia considered a learning disability under state and federal special education law?
2. Does Connecticut require dyslexia screening for all students?
3. Does the State Department of Education (SDE) provide school districts with specific guidance to assist them in identifying students with dyslexia?

### SUMMARY

Dyslexia is classified as a learning disability under state and federal special education law. The federal

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) lists dyslexia as one of the conditions included in the definition of a "specific learning disability" covered by the act (20 USC § 1401(30)). State law defines "a child requiring special education," in part, as any student eligible for special education under IDEA ([CGS § 10-76a\(5\)](#)). The IDEA definition is reprinted in guidelines the SDE provides for identifying children with learning disabilities.

Connecticut law does not require schools to screen all students for learning disabilities. Typically, some type of school intervention or evaluation is triggered by a teacher or parent identifying an academic or behavioral problem.

In 2008, SDE developed a program called Scientific Research-Based Intervention (SRBI) (1) for learning disability screening of all students with academic or behavioral problems and (2) as an intervention framework for designing a program to assist the students. The framework is used to provide special instruction or intervention to a student through a three-tiered process. If these interventions do

not improve the student's performance, the student may be referred for a formal special education evaluation, which may take different forms depending on the student's problem. The formal evaluation is intended to determine whether the student's learning difficulties are due to a learning disability, such as dyslexia.

While dyslexia clearly falls under state and federal special education law, the broad scope of the guidance documents sometimes makes it less than obvious. For example, the [Individual Education Program \(IEP\)](#) form that must be completed for every special education student does not specifically refer to dyslexia. The IEP includes a list of 14 different disabilities or disability categories. While some items on the list are specific (e.g., "autism") others are broad categories (e.g., "specific learning disabilities" and "other health impairment"). The category of specific learning disabilities (SLD) includes dyslexia, but at this level it is harder to find it in specific guidance documents. For example, SDE's 100-page [Guidelines for Identifying Children with Learning Disabilities](#) (a.k.a. "guidelines") includes specific information on dyslexia but the dyslexia information is interwoven with information on other SLD. Dyslexia is not addressed specifically in one section, therefore it requires a close reading to extract all the dyslexia information from the document. SDE expects to release an updated version of an online training course regarding learning disabilities in early spring 2014. The current version of the course was taken offline in preparation for the new version.

This report will provide a brief overview of how students with learning disabilities, including dyslexia, are identified in Connecticut and enrolled in special education services.

## **OVERVIEW OF LEARNING DISABILITY IDENTIFICATION PROCESS**

Connecticut schools employ a system of tiered interventions to assist students with academic, social-emotional, or behavior problems. This tiered system is based on a research-based approach to education approved by IDEA and subsequent federal regulations.

When a Connecticut student is not responding to this tiered intervention approach, the school may refer the student for special education assessment. However, by law, parents and school personnel may refer a student for special education assessment at any time, regardless of whether the student has been given individualized interventions under the tiered system. This system is designed, in part, to identify students that should be evaluated for learning disabilities, including dyslexia.

## ***Tiered Interventions***

The federal IDEA and subsequent regulations permit school districts to use a data-based process for identifying students with learning disabilities called Response to Intervention (RTI). This method uses scientific and research-based instruction and intervention tailored to each student's needs. Adjustments to the program are made based on the student's performance level over time. RTI programs are not special education programs, but are intended to address academic and behavioral problems for any student struggling with these issues.

In Connecticut, the RTI principles have been developed into a framework known as SRBI. These programs are designed to emphasize core general education supplemented by targeted interventions for students with learning, social-emotional, or behavior problems. The program is divided into three tiers that overlay and supplement traditional education practices.

Tier I encompasses general education, general and differentiated instruction, and overall social-emotional and behavioral support for the entire student body. Tier II activities are short-term interventions for students experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties that have not responded to the core curriculum of Tier I or differentiation of instruction and social-emotional support systems. Tier III is a more intensive or individualized level of short-term interventions targeted at students that do not respond to Tier II interventions. Failure to respond to the tiered intervention system does not automatically mean the student has a learning disability. On the other hand, students receiving special education services often receive multi-tiered interventions in addition to the special education services.

School districts use periodic universal screenings to identify struggling students. The results of these screenings are used to provide struggling students with intervention under SRBI's various tiers. If the student does not make sufficient progress, he or she can be referred for a special education evaluation, which is intended to identify whether the learning difficulties are due to a specific learning disability.

## ***Special Education Evaluation***

This process begins with a referral to a Planning and Placement Team (PPT), which reviews the available information about the student to determine whether a special education evaluation is needed. A referral is a written request from the student's parent or a teacher, or other relevant professional that a student be evaluated for special education. A PPT consists of the student's parents or guardian, at least one of the student's regular teachers, at least one of the student's special

education teachers, a representative of the school district who is qualified to supervise special education programs, a student services employee such as a school psychologist or guidance counselor, and any person with special expertise regarding the student.

As a part of its assessment, the PPT examines the alternative procedures and programs used in regular education under SRBI and the student's progress. The PPT may conclude the student is making adequate progress and decline further evaluation or it may conclude the evidence supports eligibility for special education services. If the PPT determines more information is needed, it designs appropriate evaluation procedures for the particular student. In the event a specific learning disability is identified, either through the initial PPT review or through further evaluation, the PPT develops an individualized education program to address the student's unique learning needs.

### ***Evaluation Elements for Dyslexia***

In order to show a student has a specific learning disability eligible for special education services under IDEA, it must be shown that the student has failed to progress sufficiently through SRBI methods that have been effective with most struggling students. When establishing this eligibility for students with dyslexia, schools generally look for characteristic symptoms of dyslexia-associated problems in reading, writing, and mathematics that have not been resolved after interventions, according to the guidelines. The following descriptions are generalized characteristics a PPT may look for in identifying students with dyslexia. Because dyslexia may affect one person more severely than another, the symptoms described below may not be present in every student with dyslexia.

In terms of reading skills, dyslexic students often have problems with single-word decoding skills and with fluency of reading. Problems with accurate and fluent single-word decoding are associated with poor phonological processing (i.e., ready knowledge of letter-sound relationships). This is most apparent when the student is attempting to read unfamiliar words because dyslexia interrupts the ability to use knowledge of letter-sound relationships and alphabetic symbols to determine how an unfamiliar word should be pronounced. Reading fluency is the ability to easily read text automatically with accuracy and appropriate inflection. Issues with reading fluency can signify an underlying problem with word processing, which is characteristic of dyslexia. In severe cases, problems with reading fluency and word decoding can lead to problems with reading comprehension. These symptoms are not exclusive to dyslexia and may present in students with mixed reading disabilities, which is a different type of learning disability. Dyslexic students can be differentiated from students with mixed reading disabilities because students with

mixed reading disabilities generally have reading comprehension problems beyond what can be attributed to problems with reading fluency and word decoding skills, according to the guidelines.

Evaluation of written expression generally focuses on basic writing skills, which are handwriting and spelling skills, and text generation, which is the ability to translate ideas into written language. Dyslexic students often have difficulty with spelling, which can be attributed to the underlying phonological problems associated with dyslexia. For many dyslexic students, the text-generation aspect of writing becomes a strength once the student's basic writing difficulties are addressed. However, there remains the concern that dyslexia can limit the student's interest in reading, which can slow the development of writing skills in the long-term by affecting the student's exposure to vocabulary and general background knowledge. Students with more severe dyslexia may find the text generation process extremely difficult and may exhibit a loss of motivation to write. The written work of dyslexic students is often shorter than work produced by their peers and uses less complex sentences.

Mathematics skills are generally evaluated with a focus on calculation skills and problem solving. Dyslexic students may have difficulty with automatic recall of basic facts about addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. These automatic recall difficulties may be connected to underlying phonological weaknesses.

The guidelines suggest PPTs should note that the strengths of intellectually gifted students can partially mask a specific learning disability. For example, a gifted student with dyslexia may compensate for poor reading fluency well enough to score in the average range on standardized tests, despite having difficulty meeting everyday classroom reading tasks. According to the guidelines, PPTs should examine both standardized test scores and ability to meet everyday classroom demands when determining whether a student has a specific learning disability.

### ***Other Relevant OLR Reports***

1. [Parents' Special Education Due Process Rights, 2007-R-0059](#)
2. [Response to Intervention Plans, 2007-R-0067](#)
3. [Special Education Evaluations and Parental Notice and Consent to Evaluations and Services, 2011-R-0083](#)

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