

AJC DIGGING DEEPER: LITERACY RATES

Will Georgia's new dyslexia mandate make a difference?



Jennifer Henderson, lead literacy center teacher, works on a word "stretching" activity at Charles R. Drew Charter School. It helps students break words into sounds.

By Ty Tagami

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Gov. Brian Kemp's signature on legislation that forces schools to get serious about a baffling reading problem could improve dismal literacy rates.

The new law might also accomplish nothing, depending on how state officials, college professors and school teachers implement it. Some fear it could even cause harm.

Senate Bill 48, which Kemp signed Thursday, mandates dyslexia screening for every kindergartner. It also requires future teachers to learn the latest research about how to spot and help students who may have it.

Advocates say the science is good enough to isolate children with dyslexia so they can be taught basic rules about speech and reading. And they say the teaching methods created for them will help all students. But some fear the law will lead to mislabeling students and say teaching methods involve tiresome memorization techniques that, if overdone, can make children hate reading.



Braxton Slaughter, 7, writes in shaving cream in the literary center at Charles R. Drew Charter School on April 18, 2019.

Nonsense “words” ensure students can apply phonics rules. Students at Drew who struggle with reading get the kind of “multisensory” interventions envisioned by Senate Bill 48. In addition to mandatory statewide screening for dyslexia in kindergarten, which Drew already does, the bill mandates teacher training that may look like what’s already happening at the Atlanta school.

SB 48 is motivated by concern about the future of a state where the bulk of students struggle with books. Only a third score “proficient” or better on reading tests by fourth grade, when the skill becomes essential for learning.

Although [lawmakers heard testimony](#) from parents and experts that dyslexia is part of the problem, the science about it has failed to convince a key audience. Teacher colleges will play a pivotal role in the success or failure of SB 48, yet academics disagree about whether the term "dyslexia" means anything useful, let alone how best to help those said to have the condition. One of their biggest membership organizations, the International Literacy Association, has advised against teachers spending a lot of time learning about dyslexia, [contending the concept is of "questionable" use](#).

Dyslexia is among the most studied topics in education. The word was coined by a German ophthalmologist in 1887, according to [the University of Oxford](#). The first academic paper about it was published in the British Medical Journal in 1896. Yet, there still is no consensus around something as fundamental as a definition. Georgia, for instance, is using different language than Texas, which was one of the first states to adopt dyslexia laws. Georgia uses what may be the most popular definition at this point — the one promoted by the International Dyslexia Association. It says the condition is rooted in the nervous system and is revealed in poor word recognition, bad spelling and weakness in translating letters to sounds.

Spotting dyslexia

Federal and state laws do not require schools to identify students with dyslexia. Instead, they must look for students who are reading worse than expected. Less than 5% of Georgia students are getting formal help for a "specific learning disability," a broad legal category that mentions dyslexia as a possible cause. Yet dyslexia researchers estimate that 10%, or even 20%, of students have dyslexia, leading to concerns about vast under-identification.

"Schools are not required to do much of anything, so what parents try to do is to work around," said Emily Howard, whose teenage [son testified](#) about dyslexia at a state Senate study committee last year.

Parents who can afford it get their own private diagnosis, but that may not result in the kind of special services that the International Dyslexia Association advises.

Jacob Dearolph, of Fulton County, said he and his wife were panicking by the time their oldest daughter reached second grade and still couldn't read.



Jacob Dearolph with two of his children at the state Capitol, Carter June, 7, (left) and Katy Mae, 6. They watched a Feb. 12, 2019 hearing about dyslexia during the legislative session.

“It was like watching her brain hit a brick wall,” he said. He cast about for answers online, and his wife shifted to “momma bear mode,” grilling school officials. They wound up getting a private diagnosis of dyslexia, but Dearolph said the school ultimately identified his daughter as having a speech problem and is now giving her special services for that instead. So the Dearolphs are paying for private dyslexia tutoring. He wanted Kemp to sign SB 48, so students like his daughter can get the help they need.

In addition to mandatory screening for all kindergartners, the law requires screening for first through third graders who show signs of dyslexia. The screening won’t start until 2024, after various methods of screening and reading intervention are studied in a pilot program. The teacher training mandate comes sooner, and colleges will be responsible for the training.

That is why the disagreement in the teacher colleges matters.

Will it help?

The fight is between those who believe children need a tailored approach to reading that only a thoughtful, well-rounded teacher can provide, and those who believe teachers need to deliver a specific kind of instruction for dyslexia.

Critics of the International Dyslexia Association, which accredits programs and is given authority in Georgia's new law to approve the reading programs that will be tried during the pilot process, say the organization promotes a narrow focus on one element of reading called "phonics." If English had only 26 sounds corresponding to each letter of the alphabet, then reading might come more easily to more children. But it has 44 sounds. Teaching phonics involves memorizing the rules for mapping the letters, and combinations of letters, to those sounds. For instance, the word "cat" has three sounds and three letters. "Boat" also has three sounds, but has four letters.



Cheryl Johnson, a teacher in the literacy center in Atlanta's Charles R. Drew Charter School dictates words to first graders to spell out as part of a word game.

Mary Guay teaches about language and literacy at the University of Georgia, and fears an emphasis on phonics could edge out time for the other elements of reading. The former school teacher and reading specialist has tutored hundreds of struggling readers.

She described the Dyslexia Association's approach as "tedious."

Children should be taught reading in a "joyful" way, with books, discussion and writing. They need meaning and context, she said: suspense, plot, characters, dialogue and setting. When reading about pigs in a pond, for instance, they can expect a farm scene and will be more likely to infer that the unfamiliar word in the text that starts with an "a" is "alfalfa" rather than "astronaut."

She fears teachers will overdose on phonics, turning kids off of reading.

“I’m worried about little ones who are reading lists of words, day after day after day,” said Guay, who teaches future teachers in UGA’s education college.

A colleague in the same building disagrees. Jennifer Lindstrom, a former member of the International Dyslexia Association board, said that for her the research is clear: every child can benefit from “sequenced, explicit, code-based instruction.” No child will be harmed, she said, and students with dyslexia “desperately” need this kind of instruction. She added that the approach is less restrictive than believed, incorporating many of the elements that educators such as Guay think are important.



Credit: TY TAGAMI / AJC

May 2, 2019, Marietta -- Gov. Brian Kemp, flanked by children, parents, lawmakers and educators, signs new dyslexia mandate during ceremony at Wheeler High School Thursday.

The success or failure of the legislation depends on how it is implemented by teachers like Tyrone Jelks. Years ago, he taught kindergartners to read by going over the sounds of the alphabet and then hitting the books. “It was basically trying to teach them whole words instead of breaking the words down,” he said.

He’s since gotten training for dyslexia, and applies it in the literacy center at Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta. Children who are behind in reading come to the center for phonics lessons. They write letters with their

fingers, pushing them through plastic trays filled with shaving cream or sand, using touch to reinforce the link between shape and sound. And they use jelly beans to count the number of sounds in words.

Video

Children who are behind in reading come to the Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta for phonics lessons.



In one exercise with markers on a table top, Jelks had three kindergartners writing out the letters for nonsense “words.” It was a way to ensure they were using the phonics rules rather than memorizing whole words. He called out “smush,” and they wrote it, then, when he said “smish,” they replaced the vowel. Next, he said “rush,” and the girl to his right giggled and wrote it on the table.

“That’s just three letters,” she squeaked. Her spelling was perfect, but she had made a mistake. No, he said, and she realized her error: “Sounds.”

Under the rules of phonics, “rush” has three sounds.



Jada Gray, 6, spells out a word during a sound stretching activity in the literacy center at Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta. The activity helps students segment sounds and words. Nonsense words are used to ensure students can apply the phonics rules they've learned.

She didn't appear bored, but will all schools have specialists trained well enough to teach in the same way? How many can afford targeted small group instruction like this? And without a study involving an identical child who does not get the same lessons, how can anyone know for sure whether this is helping?

That is one reason lawmakers mandated a three-year pilot program to be established by the fall of 2020. The state school superintendent will select districts from across the state to try out different screening and teaching programs. The state superintendent must then assess the results and advise lawmakers.

To make a difference, Georgia will have to do more than Texas, which has had an evolving set of dyslexia laws since the mid-1980s, and requires both student screening and teacher training.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal test that is the only national report card for education, says 28% of Texas fourth graders scored "proficient" or better in reading in 2002. Fifteen years later, in 2017, that rate had risen — by 1 percentage point.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia has been studied for decades, yet there is no consensus around a definition. Here are some of them:

International Dyslexia Association

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“Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.”

Explore <https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-consensus-project>

Georgia (Senate Bill 48)

‘Dyslexia’ means a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Explore <http://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/en-US/Display/20192020/SB/48>

Texas

“Dyslexia” means a disorder of constitutional origin manifested by a difficulty in learning to read, write, or spell, despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence, and sociocultural opportunity.

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“Related disorders” includes disorders similar to or related to dyslexia, such as developmental auditory imperception, dysphasia, specific developmental dyslexia, developmental dysgraphia, and developmental spelling disability.

Explore <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.38.htm>

Terms associated with dyslexia:

- Disorders - are diagnosed by clinicians
- Disabilities - are identified by educators
- Specific Learning Disability - one of many legal categories of education disability that must be served under federal law; dyslexia is referenced in the description of the category
- Phonemes - are the units of speech; each sound in a word
- Phonemic awareness - the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes
- Phonological awareness - the ability to comprehend the sounds of language; necessary for rhyming, counting syllables and for distinguishing each sound in a word
- Phonics - the ability to translate letters and letter combinations to phonemes and to combine them into words; sounding out words
- Decoding - the process of translating text to speech
- Fluency - the ability to decode words automatically, to read at a good pace, with inflection and expression
- Vocabulary - the linking of words to their meaning
- Comprehension - the ability to extract meaning from a combination of words

Resources

Report of the U.S. National Reading Panel

<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

Report of Sir Jim Rose for the United Kingdom

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20101008185720/http://ttrb.ac.uk/viewarticle2.aspx?contentId=15879>

Georgia Department of Education

<https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/SpecialEducation-Services/Pages/Dyslexia.aspx>

International Literacy Association (research advisories on dyslexia)

https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory.pdf?sfvrsn=411ba18e_6

https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory-addendum.pdf?sfvrsn=85bca08e_4

International Dyslexia Association (rebuttal to ILA advisory)

<https://dyslexiaida.org/ida-urges-ila-to-review-and-clarify-key-points-in-dyslexia-research-advisory/>

Cox Campus (a resource created by the Rollins Center of the Atlanta Speech School, with funding from the James M. Cox Foundation, which is connected with Cox Enterprises, the owner of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Made By Dyslexia, an international advocacy group

Explore <http://madebydyslexia.org/>

About the Author



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Ty Tagami is a staff writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.

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