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EDUCATION

# Lawmakers see dyslexia as a largely hidden problem for Georgia schools



Kindergarten teacher Kelsey McCorkle (center) works with her students during a phonics lesson at Benteen Elementary School in Atlanta on Thursday, Feb. 7, 2019.

By Ty Tagami

Feb 8, 2019



Jay Leno and Richard Branson have it. So does California Gov. Gavin Newsom. And if you're in a room with 10 kids, one or two of them may also have it.

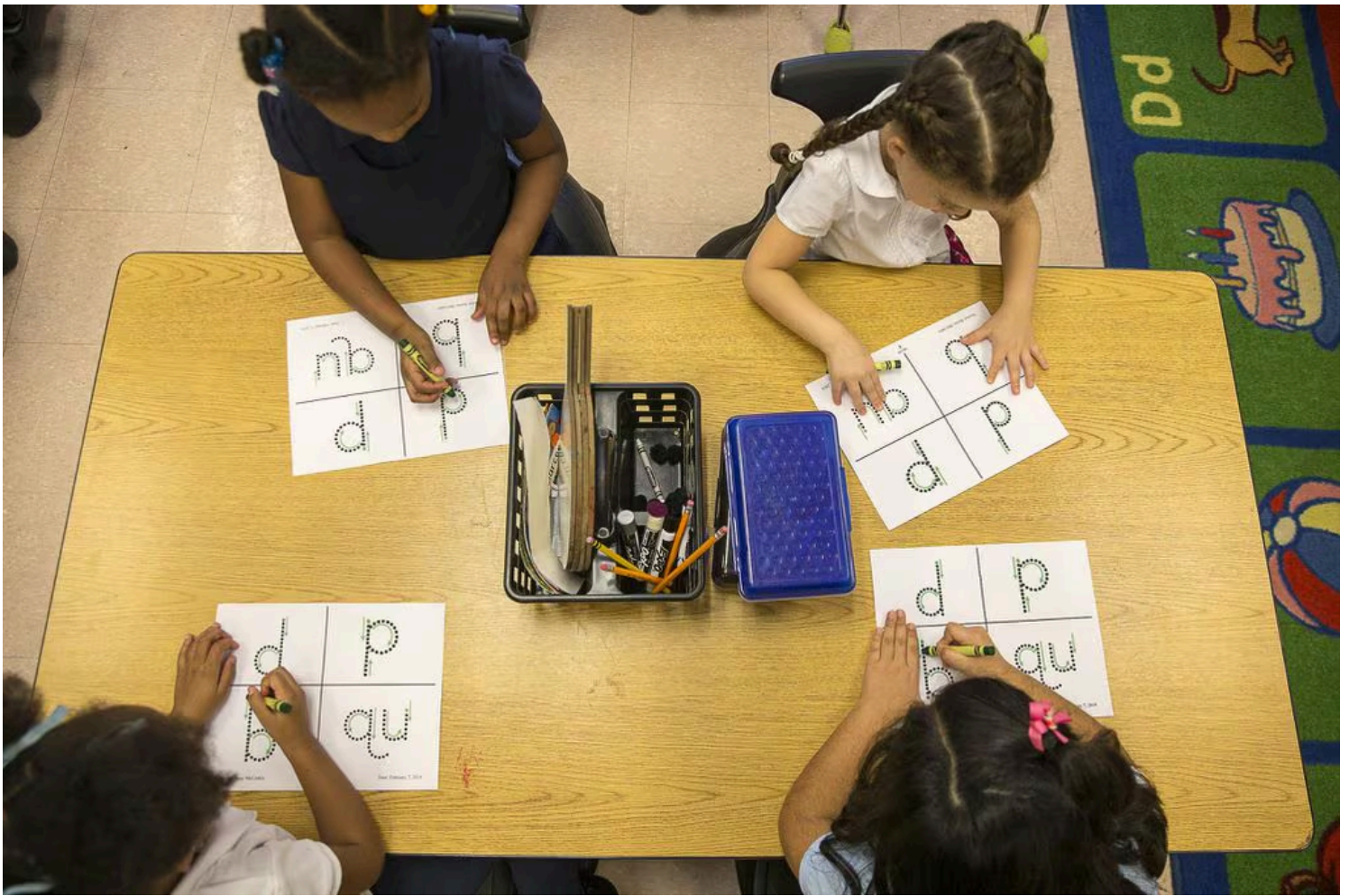
Ten to 20 percent of the population lives with dyslexia, researchers say, with most probably going undiagnosed. The federal government requires schools to help children who have it, but many parents, as well as other concerned family members, say they aren't getting that help.

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> UPDATE: [Governor signs dyslexia legislation](#)

“Something is wrong with the educational system if this is considered acceptable,” said Florine Wood, who said her twin grandsons read like children in second grade though they are 12. Besides falling behind, their self-esteem has been sunk by their inability to read and write “because their educational needs are not being met.”

[Stories like this](#) have captured the attention of Georgia lawmakers who want new mandates in the way schools deal with dyslexia. [Senate Bill 48](#) would require screening for every student starting in kindergarten. It also would establish dyslexia training programs for current teachers and require that every would-be teacher attending a public college get such specialized instruction.



Kindergarten students trace letters and digraphs onto a plastic gridded sheet during their phonics lesson at Benteen Elementary School in Atlanta. The plastic grid is used as a sensory tool to help students remember their lesson.

Unlike Georgia, most states in the region have laws on dyslexia, according to the Southern Regional Education Board, a research institution established by governors. But Georgia would be a leader if it passes a law mandating dyslexia training in teacher colleges, becoming the fifth of 16 Southern states to do so.



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Teachers who've had dyslexia training marvel at what they were missing.

"It has changed my teaching drastically," said Kelsey McCorkle, who was among a group of Atlanta teachers trained in the [Orton-Gillingham](#) method. The decades-old teaching system helps dyslexic students cope with the different wiring of their brains. Teachers learn different ways to communicate how to break words down into their basic components. For instance, with tactile learners, McCorkle uses a sandbox or shaving cream, so her kindergartners can move their whole arms through the outlines of letters, and feel them.

[Sen. P.K. Martin](#), R-Lawrenceville, is the lead sponsor on the bipartisan bill, the first to get a hearing in the Senate Education and Youth Committee in this young legislative session. Martin is the new committee chairman.



Credit: Georgia State Senate

Sen. P.K. Martin, R-Lawrenceville, named chairman of Senate Education and Youth Committee in 2019.

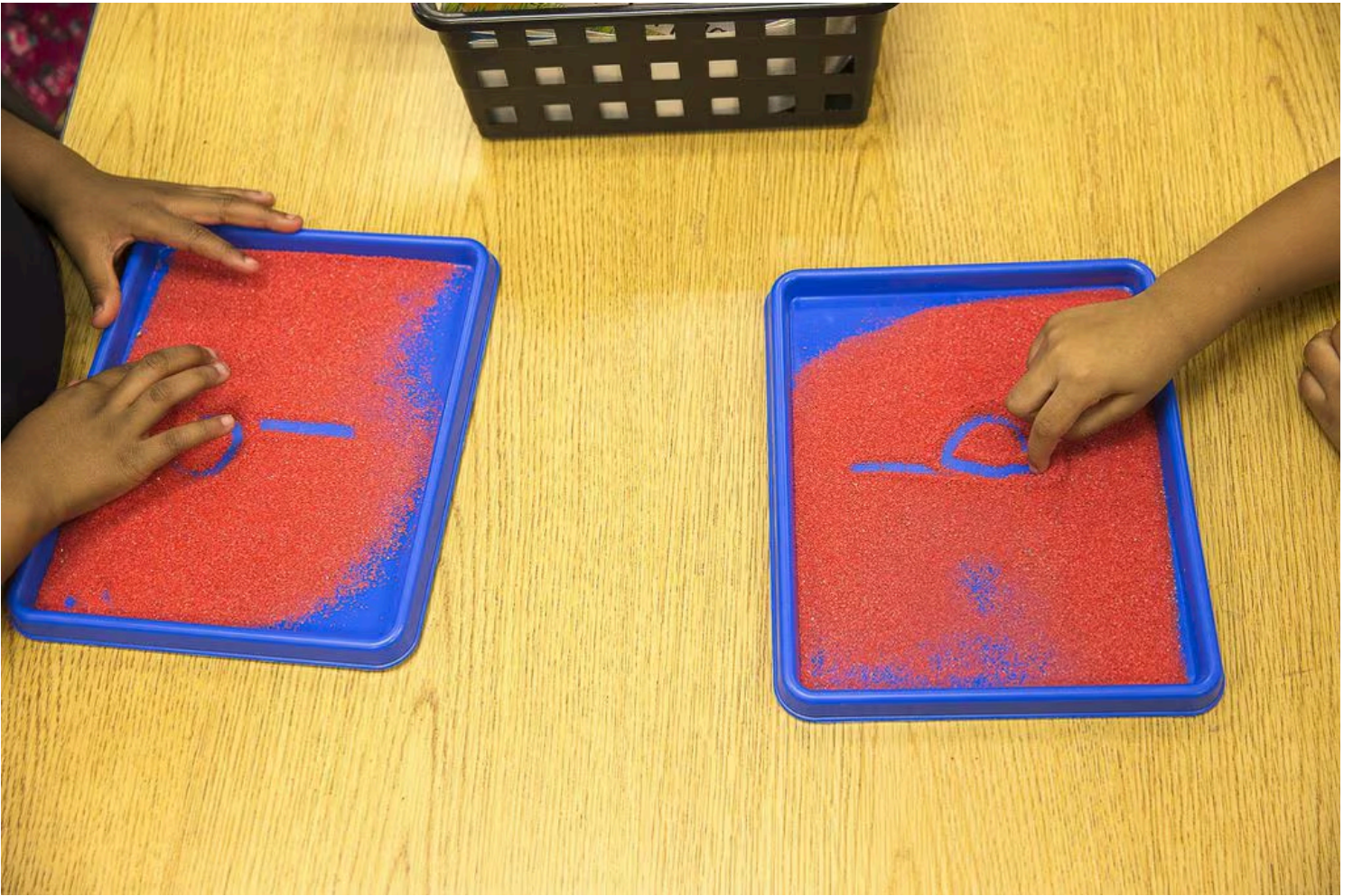
As people he knew revealed they had been living with the condition, Martin came to see a significant but hidden problem. Two of three Georgia children cannot read proficiently by third grade, and Martin is among a growing contingent who point to undiagnosed dyslexia as a reason.

“There are a lot of kids that struggle with it,” he said. Georgia does the bare minimum required under federal law, which mentions dyslexia almost in passing, and doesn’t tell states how to detect it. “Our code is silent on dyslexia.”

School districts, many with tight budgets and rising special education costs, would only have to do the screening if the Legislature allocates funding for it. The responsibility for teacher training, meanwhile, would fall on state agencies and on teacher colleges. A former senator who has researched the cost of screening estimated it to be about \$1 million a year.

Martin is carrying on the work of his Senate colleague Fran Millar. Before the Dunwoody Republican lost his seat to a Democrat last fall, Millar spent the summer leading a Senate study committee on dyslexia. Millar, who'd been a leader on K-12 policy in the Senate, said he knew little about dyslexia until a woman stood up at a community meeting two years ago and asked him what he was doing about it.

Puzzled, he began researching, and discovered a population of struggling students and their anxious and agonized parents. People he knew, including a fellow lawmaker, disclosed that they had dyslexia. He concluded that officials feared the scope of the problem, and the cost of addressing it.



Kindergartners draw the letter “b” in a tray of sand while learning phonics at Benteen Elementary School in Atlanta.

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“I think a lot of people don’t want to admit that it exists,” he said. “If we do admit it, what are we going to do about it?”

But the pain of the young is a hard thing to ignore. Barrett Howard, a high school senior, was among the students who testified at Millar’s study committee.

In third grade, he couldn’t write his own name, he said in an interview this week. Teachers thought he was lazy when he rejected reading assignments. That year he was paired with a kindergartner in a “book buddy” program where one kid, usually the elder, is supposed to read to the other.

“The kindergartner I got paired with could read better than I could,” he said. It was a frustrating time.

That he can read today is a testament to his mother’s will, to her connections, to her knowledge of schools and to family money, a unique combination that she realizes few facing similar challenges possess. The director of a private preschool, she comes from a family of teachers with ties to educators who advised her as she became increasingly concerned that her little boy wasn’t learning to read with the other kids.

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With help from her parents, Emily Howard said she paid thousands of dollars for a private evaluation that confirmed dyslexia. But when she took it to the City Schools of Decatur, she said, they rejected it, suggesting the psychologist had merely given her the outcome she wanted. So she hired an attorney. Nearly \$10,000 later, she managed to get her son into a special education program, where he got one-on-one attention and other help.





Credit: HANDOUT

Howard said mandatory early screening would have saved her son from years of missed learning. As students age past third grade, an old teaching adage goes, they shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Any delay in acquiring the crucial skill can doom a student's prospects.

A Decatur schools official said the district cannot, by law, discuss specific cases of individual students, but said the district follows the state rules when determining if a student is eligible for special education services.

Tina Engberg, whose son reads like a second-grader, knows the consequences of not learning to read well. Recently, the 13-year-old was looking at a \$5 bill and could not make out a word near Lincoln's right ear: "tender." He cannot read the menu when they go to Chick-fil-A.

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Children like him are clever. When young, they can fool teachers into thinking they can read. They memorize. They make excuses for missed homework. They talk their way out of

assignments. Then, after fourth grade, the words grow longer, the material harder, the grading more serious.

He's not going to get a diploma, unless she wills him to it, said Engberg, the state leader of a volunteer group called Decoding Dyslexia.

Mandatory screening will force the issue, once everyone realizes the scope, she said. "My hope with this bill is it will make it a harder problem for school districts to ignore."

## **WHAT THE LAW SAYS ABOUT DYSLEXIA**

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Georgia law is silent on dyslexia, but schools must comply with federal law. According to the 2018 Georgia Senate study committee on dyslexia:

- The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 includes dyslexia in the category of a "specific learning disability" that may entitle students to special education services.
- However, that federal law doesn't define dyslexia, nor does it dictate the services or accommodations to be provided to students with the condition.

The Southern Regional Education Board says federal law requires schools to identify students with disabilities, including those with dyslexia. Whether or not such students have a dyslexia diagnosis, schools must consider whether their reading disability is severe enough to warrant special services.

Though dyslexia is not mentioned in Georgia law, state school board policy notes that federal law says having dyslexia could qualify a student as having a disability needing special education services. The Georgia Department of Education says determinations of service are based on an analysis of the student's academic performance, along with other considerations, such as vision, hearing and cognition. If the student is behind where he or she should be based on measures of intelligence and doesn't improve with instructional interventions, experts will determine whether special education services are merited.

## **About the Author**

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**Ty Tagami**



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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