



**DYSLEXIA DC**

**Universal Screener  
Implementation Guidance  
For DC Law 23-191**

Addressing Dyslexia and Other  
Reading Difficulties Act of 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

*Addressing Dyslexia and Other Reading Difficulties Amendment Act of 2020* was enacted March 2021. With [DC Law 23-191](#), the District of Columbia [joins 40 other states](#) in requiring **universal screening** for reading difficulties, including dyslexia. The subtitle of [DC Law 23-191](#), “*Access to Reading for All*,” draws from research showing that almost all children with early reading problems, whether they’re at risk for dyslexia or not, benefit from the early identification and targeted instruction<sup>1</sup> that’s facilitated by universal screening. For those students who are at risk for dyslexia, early identification and intervention have been found to increase their academic and emotional well-being, even “demonstrating efficacy in preventing the incidence of reading difficulties altogether.”<sup>2</sup> Universal screening is a key step toward changing literacy outcomes for students across the District of Columbia.

## KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- **Universal Screeners Do Not Diagnose Dyslexia.**
  - Universal screeners are *not* diagnostic tools and will flag students for being “at risk” for a variety of reasons. A designation of “at risk” is a signal to intervene rather than a diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>
  - An estimated 80 percent of students will respond to targeted, systematic and explicit tier 1 reading instruction without the need for sustained and intensive intervention,<sup>4</sup> and an estimated 95 percent of students can learn to read.<sup>5</sup> As such, universal screening data should be used to make informed decisions about tier 1 instruction, intervention groupings and ongoing progress monitoring for all students.
- **What is Dyslexia?**
  - Dyslexia is a learning disability that impacts reading and spelling. [DC Law 23-191](#) has adopted [The International Dyslexia Association’s](#) definition of dyslexia. Attributes of dyslexia involve persistent difficulties with foundational skills that involve the ability to read and spell words accurately and fluently. These difficulties are unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and are not the result of a lack of instruction. Nadine Gaab, Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Boston Children’s Hospital and the Harvard Medical School and a member of the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, highlights that “the hallmark of dyslexia is not poor reading performance; rather, it is poor reading performance in the face of effective reading instruction.”
- **Purpose of Screening Reading Foundational Skills**
  - Learning to read is a complex process that relies on a range of critical subskills. Reading screeners directly measure students’ proficiency with these reading and pre-reading skills. A universal screener can indicate a student’s readiness for tier 1 reading instruction and can be predictive of potential risks for reading difficulties such as dyslexia.

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1 Velluntino et al., 1996.

2 Al Otaiba et al., 2009; Mathes et al., 2005.

3 Ives et al., 2019.

4 Shapiro, E. S., 2014.

5 Mathes, Patricia & Denton, Carolyn & Fletcher, Jack & Anthony, Jason & Francis, David & Schatschneider, Christopher. (2005).

[DC Law 23-191](#) outlines that local education agencies (LEAs) must screen students in grades K through 2 in the following areas:

Rapid Automatized Naming	Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN) is the “check-engine light” <sup>6</sup> for later reading achievement. Students are asked to name an array of familiar items as quickly as possible. This measure parallels many of the same cognitive and linguistic skills central to later reading.	<b>Example:</b> A student is presented with a page showing a range of familiar objects (e.g., cat, moon, book) and is asked to name the objects from left to right as quickly as possible in a timed trial.
Phonological and Phonemic Awareness	Phonological awareness is “the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of words, including syllables, onset-rimes, and phonemes [sounds].” Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that includes phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is “the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds [phonemes] in spoken words.” <sup>7</sup>  These skills are strongly linked to word reading and are therefore critical for later success with reading and reading comprehension. <sup>8</sup>	<b>Example:</b> A student hears the word “sat,” and is asked to segment the word into its individual phonemes “/s/ /a/ /t/.”
Letter Sound Correspondence	Letter sound correspondence refers to connecting the sounds of spoken English to the letters used to represent those sounds. Letter sound correspondence is predictive of early reading achievement. <sup>9</sup>	<b>Example:</b> A student is presented with a page of letters and is asked “Can you tell me what letter this is? Can you tell me what sound it makes?”
Decoding/ Phonics	Phonics builds off basic letter sound correspondences and teaches readers to apply increasingly complex spelling patterns to the reading and spelling of words. Research suggests that explicit and systematic instruction in phonics is useful for all children. <sup>10</sup>	<b>Example:</b> A student is presented with a page of nonsense words to blend. These nonsense words represent the major spelling patterns of written English.

- **Reading Foundational Skills Are Not Grade-Specific.**
  - The rate at which foundational reading skills are acquired will vary student to student. Teaching reading foundational skills to anyone of any age based on screener data is critical for later academic success.
  - When screeners indicate that students have gaps in their reading foundational skills, it is critical to intentionally address those gaps with targeted, explicit and systematic instruction that includes opportunities for students to practice and receive corrective feedback. It is also important to provide ways for all students to explore cognitively demanding comprehension and content-based tasks. Students will benefit from the opportunity to engage with ideas and grade-level language complexity, especially with scaffolding.

6 [Learning Difficulties Australia: What Do Educators Need To Know About RAN?](#)  
7 Reading Rockets: Phonological and Phonemic Awareness  
8 Ehri et al., 2001; Kamhi & Catts, 2012  
9 Catts et al., 2002; O’Conner & Jenkins, 1999; Schatschneider et al., 2004  
10 (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, and Mehta, 1998).

## PURPOSE OF UNIVERSAL SCREENING

Universal screeners should be used for all students in grades K-2, at the beginning, middle and end of an academic year to determine growth and needs in foundational literacy skills. As the term “universal” suggests, all students in grades K-2 inclusive of English learners and students who are receiving gifted services and special education services will participate in universal screener implementation.

- **The Purpose of Universal Screening:** The [National Center on Improving Literacy](#) highlights three reasons to screen and provide remediation for students in grades K-2.
  - **Prevention.** Reading problems can be prevented with early, targeted interventions that address a student’s specific academic needs.
  - **Early Intervention is Key to Reading Success.** Patterns of reading development are established early and are stable over time unless interventions are put in place to support student progress.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Reading Opportunity Gaps are Difficult to Close Once Opened.** Without intense interventions, struggling readers do not eventually “catch up” to their average performing peers—in fact, the gap between strong and weak readers increases over time.<sup>12</sup>
    - Reading interventions that begin in third grade and beyond are likely to be less successful and less cost-effective than interventions that begin in the earlier grades.<sup>13</sup>
    - It is estimated to take four times as long to intervene in fourth grade as it does in late kindergarten due to brain development and the increase in content for students to learn as they grow older.<sup>14</sup>
    - **In summary:** The later interventions begin, the longer they take to work, the longer they need to be implemented each day and the less likely they are to produce desired effects.<sup>15</sup>
- **Selecting a Screener:** The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has provided [an approved list of universal screeners](#). If an LEA opts to use a screening tool that has not been approved by OSSE, the LEA shall make available, upon request, its reasoning as to why it chose to use that screening tool. Justification letters will specify how the selected screener measures the subdomains outlined above: RAN, phonological awareness, letter sound correspondence and decoding.

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11 Torgesen et al., 2001

12 Torgesen, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2001

13 Adams, 1990; Good, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 1986; Torgesen, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2001

14 [National Institute of Children’s Health and Human Development](#).

15 Adams, 1990; Good, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 2001

## UNIVERSAL SCREENER GUIDANCE

- **[DC Law 23-191](#) requires that LEAs:**
  - Screen all students in grades K-2 for reading difficulties at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. This is critical for progress monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of tier 1 instruction and intervention.
  - All students regardless of when they start the school year, shall have an initial universal screener administered. Examiners should be trained to follow the assessment’s directions and protocols with fidelity.
  - If the screener results suggest a student is at risk for reading difficulties, the LEA will provide written notification to the parent or guardian of the student that includes the screening results, describes the supplemental reading instruction that will be provided to the student and requests a meeting to discuss individualized student support. OSSE has provided a template for this notification in [the Dyslexia Legislation Communications Toolkit](#).
- **OSSE recommends:**
  - Providing families with an advance letter that indicates the purpose of screening, which universal screener will be used, and why. OSSE has provided a template for this notification in the [Dyslexia Legislation Communications Toolkit](#).
  - Providing written notification to the parent(s) or guardian(s) of *all* students that includes screener results.
  - Providing family-facing data reports produced by the selected universal screener in addition to the notification letters. For example, the DIBELS [Parent Report](#).
- LEAs are not required to share screening data with OSSE but are expected to use universal screener data to inform tier 1 and intervention instruction. Schools should provide at least three levels of instructional support for students, based on their risk for developing reading difficulties:
  - Tier 1: Core classroom instruction for students reading at or above grade level (i.e., low risk for reading difficulties).
  - Tier 2: Moderate additional support for students reading somewhat below grade level expectations (i.e., moderate risk for reading difficulties).
  - Tier 3: Intense additional support for students reading well below grade level expectations (i.e., high risk for reading difficulties).

## GUIDANCE ON SCREENING ENGLISH LEARNERS

To create effective literacy instruction for all English learners (ELs) and multilingual learners (MLs), it is necessary to screen students for potential reading difficulties and intentionally monitor progress. Given that ELs come from diverse language backgrounds and have varying degrees of English Language Proficiency (ELP), OSSE recommends the following guidance for universal screener implementation and data interpretation.

- **The Same Measures and Assessment Approaches Can Be Used with ELs and Native English Speakers**
  - **Guidance:** Students should be comfortable with the educator performing the screening. If available, a staff member who speaks the student’s native language can provide the screener instructions, or a translator can be acquired to either give the instructions or create a recording of the instructions that can be delivered to the student. Otherwise, the universal screener should be administered in English.
  - **Research:** Early reading measures administered in English can be used to screen ELs for reading difficulties even when English proficiency is limited.<sup>16</sup>
- **Screen EL Students’ Foundational Reading Skills**
  - **Guidance:** Students’ foundational reading skills, including phonological and phonemic awareness, letter sound correspondence and phonics/decoding skills, should be screened to identify strengths and growth areas. Prior to administering the universal screener, the student should be provided with two or three practice items. Practice should include modeling the screener tasks for the student and providing corrective feedback. Once the administration of the universal screener has begun, the examiner should follow the assessment directions and protocols.
  - **Research:** Assessing EL students’ foundational reading skills has been shown to accurately predict later reading performance in word reading, oral reading fluency and reading comprehension.<sup>17</sup>
- **Screen EL Students Using RAN**
  - **Guidance:** Students with limited English proficiency should be provided additional rehearsal and practice items before facilitating the RAN subtest.
  - **Research:** RAN measures can help disentangle whether reading difficulties are due to a learning disorder or a lower proficiency in the language of instruction.<sup>18</sup> The strength of the RAN-reading relationship in bilingual students is “a strong predictor between languages, demonstrating a cross-language effect.”<sup>19</sup>
- **Screen Students in Dual Language Immersion and Spanish Immersion Programs**
  - **Guidance:** Students receiving instruction in two languages should be screened first in English then, if the student is flagged for being “at risk” for reading difficulties, they can be screened in Spanish. For example, the Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura (IDEL) is a universal screener for Spanish speakers and can be used in conjunction with DIBELS for a student receiving instruction in both languages. If screening in both languages is not an option, students should be screened in English using one of the OSSE approved universal screeners.
  - **Research:** While “early reading assessments in English are valid for English learners,”<sup>20</sup> the use of universal screeners in both languages can provide “a richer picture of decoding skills or familiarity with the alphabet.”<sup>21</sup>
- **Screen “At Risk” EL Students More Than Three Times a Year**
  - **Guidance:** Students flagged for being at risk for reading difficulties should receive progress monitoring more frequently than three times a year. EL students flagged for being at risk should receive progress monitoring measures based on the severity of the potential risk. for reading difficulties should receive

16 Chiappe & Siegel (1999); Chiappe, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley (2002); Lesaux & Siegel (2003); Limbos & Geva, (2001).

17 Chiappe, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, (2002) Geva et al. (2000); Lesaux & Siegel (2003); Limbos & Geva (2001); Manis et al. (2004.)

18 Carioti, Stucchi, Toneatto, et al. (2022) Wood, Bustamante, Fitton, Brown, & Petscher (2017)

19 [Kishchak, Ewert, Szczerbiński, et al\(2023\)](#)

20 [Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades IES Practice Guide \(2007\)](#)

21 [Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades IES Practice Guide \(2007\)](#)

- **Research:** EL students at high risk for reading problems should be progress monitored on a weekly or biweekly basis, depending on the severity of the risk.<sup>22</sup>
- **Note:** OSSE will provide updated universal screener guidance and a new list of approved screeners as additional resources become available.

#### Best Practices for Interpreting Universal Screener Data for ELs:

According to the National Center for Education Evaluation, universal screeners administered at the beginning of the academic year “will tend to overidentify students as ‘at risk’ for reading difficulties, especially for kindergarten EL students.”<sup>23</sup> Note, universal screening student data is not currently being collected by OSSE. Screener data for ELs and MLs is meant for collecting baseline data, monitoring progress and making informed instructional decisions. OSSE recommends the following guidelines for analyzing EL and ML universal screener data.

- **Anticipate Overidentification**
  - Use beginning-of-the-year universal screening results to develop a general sense of EL and ML students’ early literacy skills. This data should not be viewed as a conclusive indication of how they will respond to instruction. “A better indication of how students will respond to school instruction comes from performance scores from the middle and end of kindergarten. These scores should be used to identify students requiring serious instructional support.”<sup>24</sup>
- **Compare Student Performance on Universal Screeners in Their Native Language and English**
  - If a student was screened in both their native language and English, compare the results to identify deficits across both assessments. A native Spanish speaker, for example, who is at risk for dyslexia and reading difficulties will likely show weaknesses on both screeners.
- **Use a Combination of “Best Scores” for Multilingual Students<sup>25</sup>**
  - A combination of “best scores” can provide more accurate classification of multilingual students. For example, after screening a bilingual student in Spanish and English, the educator could obtain the standard scores from the assessment administration manuals and use a combination to classify the student’s risk level.
- **“True Peer” Comparisons**
  - “True peers” are other ELs and MLs from similar cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds who have lived in the US for the same amount of time.<sup>26</sup> Comparing data and skill acquisition trajectories between true peers can inform the potential need for more intensive intervention for some students.
- **Include EL Teacher(s) In Data Analysis.**
  - EL educators can contribute to testing students and data analysis. EL teachers have expertise in language acquisition and development to support instructional plans

22 Baker & Good (1995); Dominguez de Ramirez & Shapiro (2006)

23 Baker (2006)

24 [Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades IES Practice Guide \(2007\)](#)

25 Lugo-Neris et al., (2015)

26 [Barrera & Liu, 2010; J. E. Brown & Doolittle, 2008](#)

## GUIDANCE ON SCREENING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a student with a disability as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more major life activities. This includes Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, visual impairment/blindness, deafness/hard of hearing, orthopedic impairment and intellectual disabilities. Dyslexia can co-occur with other disabilities and roughly 60 percent of students with dyslexia will have at least one other diagnosis.<sup>27</sup> To maximize educational outcomes, students with disabilities need access to universal screening and early reading instruction. Early universal screening takes a proactive approach to identifying and intervening for all students, regardless of previously identified disabilities.<sup>28</sup>

### Universal Screening for Students with Disabilities (SWDs):

- **Guidance:** Screen SWDs' foundational reading skills using an [OSSE Approved Universal Screener](#).
- **Research:** Screening SWDs increases long term educational outcomes<sup>29</sup> and proactively addresses the underdiagnosis of reading disorders within that population.<sup>30</sup> The benefits of early identification and intervention for SWD outweigh the burden of screening.<sup>31</sup>

### Best Practices for Screening Students With Disabilities:

- **Accommodations**
  - When screening a student with a disability, appropriate accommodations include, but are not limited to, ensuring that the student is comfortable with the educator performing the screening, completing the screening in a quiet setting and the use of assistive technology including glasses, hearing aids and magnification. Educators should refer to guidance provided by the publisher of the screener when selecting accommodations.
  - For a student with a speech or hearing disability, including Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) students, the individual conducting the assessment (e.g., a Speech Language Pathologist [SLP]) should be familiar with the student's use of language, including verbal speech or sign language.<sup>32</sup>
- **Alternative Assessments**
  - Some screeners, including DIBELS 8<sup>th</sup> Edition and Acadience, are not recommended by their publishers for students who are D/HH, or have fluency disorders. Other screening measures should be used in consultation with SLP or other service providers. For example, the Test of Early Reading –D/HH and the Test of Silent Word Reading Fluency have been found to be useful for screening D/HH and students with speech disorders, respectively.<sup>33</sup>
  - For students who are blind or visually impaired, the appropriate representation of orthography (e.g., uncontracted braille or letters) should be used during screening.<sup>34</sup> Research suggests universal screening include measures for identifying ending sounds and naming final letters and sounds; basic decoding of short and long vowel sounds; recognizing sight words; and identifying letters.<sup>35</sup>
  - For students with cognitive, intellectual or other developmental disabilities, screening should include assessment of the child's receptive and expressive language, and appropriate norms for screening should be used.<sup>36</sup>

### Using Screening Data from Students with Disabilities:

- If screening data indicate that a SWD may be at risk for dyslexia, they should be provided with an intensive, systematic, explicit reading intervention that includes intensive instruction in the area of need. Structured literacy interventions can benefit **all** students.<sup>37</sup> Students should receive regular progress monitoring to assess each child's response to the intervention. Special educators, specialized service providers, general educators and school leaders should share screening and progress monitoring data in order to guide instruction.

27 Darweesh et al., 2020

28 Brimo et al., 2020; Kaplan, 2001; Sanfilippo et al, 2020

29 Catts et al., 2015; Lovett et al, 2017; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2019

30 Harris et al., 2023; Herman & Roy, 2015

31 Hall et al, 2022; McGrath, Peterson & Pennington, 2019; Tanaka et al., 2011

32 Cripps et al, 2015; Herman, 2014; Kelley and McCann, 2022

33 Adlof et al., 2017; Enns & Lafond, 2007

34 Harris et al, 2023

35 Stewart et al., 2022

36 Pennington et al., 2012

37 Spear-Swerling, 2019

## GLOSSARY

**At Risk:** Students demonstrating one or more risk factors (i.e., “red flags”) that indicate potential for common reading problems, including dyslexia.

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**Decoding:** The ability to translate a word from print to speech, usually by employing knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences. This refers to the act of deciphering a new word by sounding it out.

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**Dyslexia:** A brain-based learning disability that affects reading. Children with dyslexia often have poor phonological skills, resulting in difficulties with decoding, reading fluency and spelling. Dyslexia can also impact reading comprehension and writing.

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**English Learner:** English learners (ELs) are students whose first language is not English and who are in the process of learning English. Defined by the US Department of Education as national-origin-minority students who are limited-English-proficient.

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**Evidence-Based Practices:** Practices for teaching reading that are grounded and proven in peer reviewed research.

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**Explicit and Systematic Instruction:** Explicit instruction is direct, clear and concise in relation to a specific learning objective. Systematic instruction follows a scope and sequence in which lessons build on previously taught information, building from easier to more complex tasks and breaking down harder skills into smaller parts.

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**Fluency:** Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, at a good pace and with proper expression, otherwise known as prosody.

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**Intervention:** Additional small group or individualized instruction that is tailored to student needs so that they can make progress and meet grade-level learning goals.

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**Phonemes:** The smallest parts of spoken language that combine to form words. For example, the word bat is made up of three phonemes: /b/, /a/ and /t/. Most linguists agree that English has 44 phonemes: 19 vowel phonemes and 25 consonant phonemes.

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**Reading Difficulties:** Difficulty with one or more foundational reading skills that impede a student’s ability to read and comprehend text.

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**Science of Reading:** The science of reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. The science of reading has been conducted over the last five decades across the world and is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages.

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**Segmenting:** Separating a word into smaller units, such as syllables, onset-rimes, or individual sounds/phonemes

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**Tiered instruction:** Ranges from daily whole class instruction where all students receive an evidence-based reading instruction, to students who receive instruction in small groups, to students receiving intensive instruction in small groups or individualized settings.

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**Universal Screening:** A tool that screens and monitors a student’s progress in foundational literacy skills to identify or predict those who may be at risk for reading difficulties.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

**OSSE's Dyslexia Landing Page:**  [Screener Selection](#) and  [Legislation FAQ](#)

**Reading Rockets:**  [English Language Learners](#)

**IES:**  [Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades](#)

**RTI Action Network:**  [Response to Intervention in Reading for English Language Learners](#)

Albers, C.A. & Martinez, R.S. (2015) *Promoting academic success with English language learners: Best practices in RTI*. The Guilford Press.

**edWeb.net:**  [English Learners and Dyslexia Screeners: Uncover the Root of Reading Disabilities](#) (1-hour webinar)

**Northwestern's Learn Lab:**  [What educators need to know about Rapid Automatized Naming \(RAN\)](#)

If additional guidance or information is needed to support universal screening implementation, contact Dustin Tamsen, Dyslexia Specialist, at [Dustin.Tamsen@dc.gov](mailto:Dustin.Tamsen@dc.gov).



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