

June 2016

Helping Students Read to Achieve: The Past, Present, and Future of Educational Policies on Dyslexia

Elias Blinkoff, '17

Swarthmore College, eblinko1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/critedpol>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blinkoff, Elias , '17 (2016) "Helping Students Read to Achieve: The Past, Present, and Future of Educational Policies on Dyslexia," *#CritEdPol: Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.24968/2473-912X.1.1.5

Available at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/critedpol/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in #CritEdPol: Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact emayorg1@swarthmore.edu.



Helping Students Read to Achieve: The Past, Present, and Future of Educational Policies on Dyslexia

Elias Blinkoff

Swarthmore College

Abstract

Developmental dyslexia is among the most common neurobehavioral disorders in children, affecting approximately 8.5 million students across the United States (Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus, 2015). Despite its prevalence as a language disorder characterized by impaired reading ability, researchers have struggled to define dyslexia, contributing to variability across state-level educational policies on dyslexia and preventing students with the disorder from being identified, and ultimately receiving appropriate intervention services. Although federal policies have indicated greater recognition of dyslexia over time, continued use of the term “specialized learning disability (SLD)” in those policies as an umbrella term for students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities may subject students with dyslexia to educational interventions that are not specific to their disorder, jeopardizing their educational achievement. Three federal policy recommendations are presented here to support the needs of students with dyslexia. First, the recent passage of the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act) is commendable, but policymakers should ensure that dyslexia is recognized beyond the category of “specific learning disability.” Next, the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus should support development of a best practices guide for educators that bridges dyslexia research and practice. Finally, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* should be amended to ensure America’s predominant special education law recognizes and addresses the needs of students with dyslexia. Collectively, these recommendations should help identify and support students with dyslexia across the United States by recognizing their unique educational needs, allowing them to read and achieve in the classroom and beyond.

1. Understanding Dyslexia as an Educational Policy Issue

Developmental dyslexia is one of the most common neurobehavioral disorders in children, estimated to affect 17-21% of the school-age population, or approximately 8.5 million students in the United States (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121; Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus (BCDC), 2015). That said, despite dyslexia's prevalence, current federal educational policies on the disorder do not sufficiently address the unique needs of students with dyslexia and state policies are inconsistent and highly variable (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 133–134 & 138). As a result of this tangled policy web, students with dyslexia may not receive the special education services that are necessary for their academic achievement. Thus, increased federal recognition of—and support for—students with dyslexia is necessary to spur state and local educational agencies into action, so that these vulnerable students can achieve long-term academic success in terms of classroom engagement and assessment performance.

This policy document will demonstrate that the current educational policy landscape for students with dyslexia results from incongruence across education, psychology, and neuroscience research with respect to the basic definition of dyslexia, its underlying causes, and appropriate classroom interventions (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58–60). After outlining these underlying issues and the associated insufficiency and variability in federal and state dyslexia policies, respectively, this document will describe how the federal policy landscape has recently shifted towards greater recognition of dyslexia in a way that could support national adoption of dyslexia-specific educational interventions. Finally, this document will outline three policy recommendations for students with dyslexia. These recommendations are intended to be implemented progressively, harnessing recent political momentum around dyslexia to promote larger-scale policy shifts in the dyslexia policy landscape, specifically addressing its present variability in order to support the educational achievement of some of our nation's most overlooked special education students. First, this document will applaud policymakers for the passage of the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act) in February 2016, a federal law that prioritizes dyslexia research with the potential to clarify the definition of dyslexia, and ultimately support a greater national consensus around dyslexia policy and best practices. However, this document will provide a cautionary note regarding READ Act implementation, focusing on the fact that the Act defines “Specific Learning

Disability”, rather than dyslexia itself, suggesting that policymakers continue to support a term that is insufficient for meeting the educational needs of students with dyslexia. Next, the document will suggest that the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus support the development of a best practices handbook for educators working with students with dyslexia. Finally, this document will recommend amendment to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; 2004) to recognize and address the unique educational needs of students with dyslexia in America’s predominant special education law.

2. Background

Before addressing the state of educational policy for students with dyslexia, it is important to understand the inherent complexity of the disorder itself, beginning with its basic definition. This is not a moot point, given that lack of consistency in the definition has led to variability in state and federal educational policies pertaining to dyslexia that that have, in turn, negatively impacted the academic achievement of students with the disorder. Dyslexia has been studied for over a century, but experts acknowledge that “a strong consensus regarding a clear, useful definition still does not exist” (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134). Within the past decade, however, researchers have identified signs and symptoms that are unique to dyslexia and critical for early identification of students with the disorder. According to psychologists and pediatricians, dyslexia is a language disorder marked by impaired phonological processing (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58; Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121; American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 2009, p. 838), so students with dyslexia often struggle with printed word recognition, spelling, reading comprehension, and writing (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134; Gabrieli, 2009, p. 280). Notably, dyslexia is not a visual impairment, as was claimed through the first half of the 20th century (Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 57; AAP, 2009, p. 837). It is also important to recognize that language impairments among students with dyslexia are often “unexpected [by educators and child development professionals] in relation to other cognitive abilities” (Lyon et al., 2003, p. 2), meaning that a student with the disorder may exhibit “reading deficits that... can not [sic] be predicted by [their] age, other academic or cognitive abilities, exposure to instruction, or sociocultural opportunities” (Lyon, 1995, p. 15). This fact makes it challenging, but educationally critical, to identify students with dyslexia in the classroom so that

they can receive appropriate educational interventions to meet their unique needs and maximize their academic achievement as soon as possible.

Beyond the linguistic focus, dyslexia experts also agree that the disorder develops early in—and persists throughout—a child’s life (Gabrieli, 2009, p. 281; Ferrer et al., 2015). A reading achievement gap between students with dyslexia and their typical peers can develop as early as first grade and remain through adolescence (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1121). As a result, researchers warn that “A student who fails to read adequately in 1st grade has a 90% probability of reading poorly in 4th grade and a 75% probability of reading poorly in high school” (Gabrieli, 2009, p. 280). Therefore, dyslexia’s long-term effects on students have led experts, and non-profit organizations such as Decoding Dyslexia, one of America’s largest parent-led dyslexia advocacy groups (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013), to put pressure on policymakers. Supported by numerous researchers (Ferrer et al., 2015, p. 1125; Gabrieli, 2009, p. 283; AAP, 2009, p. 839; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), advocacy organizations have urged policymakers to support mandatory dyslexia screenings for young students, followed by appropriate special education services for students with the disorder (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013).

Based on the research findings and advocacy work outlined above, current federal dyslexia policies are insufficient and complex, and state-level policies vary immensely with respect to the level of recognition and support given to students with dyslexia (Youman & Mather, 2013). Major federal policies for students with dyslexia include the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; 2004) and the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. However, they still fail to provide sufficient and specific educational supports for students with dyslexia.

Beginning with the IDEA, it classifies students with dyslexia as having a “specific learning disability (SLD)” (IDEA, 2004; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134), but unfortunately for many students with dyslexia, “SLD” is a large umbrella term that fails to account for important distinctions between dyslexia and other learning disabilities. This has serious implications for the special education interventions that are provided to students with dyslexia. When their unique educational needs go unrecognized, researchers suggest that they typically receive “general intervention strategies and accommodations” by default that “may or may not fit the needs of students with dyslexia” (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138). Notably, these needs tend to be related to phonological decoding, recognition of sight words, and general fluency (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 148). Even if they are assigned to a

reading specialist, students with dyslexia often receive reading instruction with other struggling readers who may not need the same type of instruction”, such as English-language learners or students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 148). While researchers admit that providing “general reading strategies” to “a heterogeneous group of struggling readers is not harmful for students with dyslexia”, they emphasize that those strategies may not target the specific needs noted above, since they often fail to differentiate between dyslexia and other cognitive impairments classified as SLDs (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147-148; READ Act, 2016). Lastly, this document recognizes that the SLD designation does not automatically promote the use of generalized interventions in every classroom. However, the terms’ broadness opens the door for schools to employ such interventions, posing an educational risk to students with dyslexia.

Turning to more practical concerns, the IDEA lays out a lengthy and complex screening process for SLDs like dyslexia that prevents timely identification of—and interventions for—students with the disorder. According to the IDEA, if a student who has been given “appropriate access to education” continues to struggle in the classroom for reasons that cannot be explained by “cultural and environmental factors”, they must be evaluated for an SLD using at least one of three evaluation procedures. Firstly, an “ability-achievement discrepancy formula” may be developed, which arguably quantifies a special education student’s academic deficit (Kavale, 2001). However, the formula must be supplemented by other documentation (e.g., classroom observations or parent reports) if it is intended as the sole means of SLD identification (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139). Secondly, educators are urged to implement research-based interventions and monitor the students’ responses. This is known as a “response-to-intervention (RTI)” approach. If the student fails to respond, then the SLD classification process continues. Lastly, educators are free to use “alternative research-based models”, including those that search for patterns in the students’ strengths and weaknesses (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139). Given the clear complexity of the SLD identification system, this document argues that students with dyslexia may not receive appropriate educational interventions in a timely manner.

As previously noted, the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* also aims to provide federal support for students with dyslexia. Under Sec. 504, these students have a disability in reading, which the law cites as one of nine “major life activities” (Rehabilitation Act, 1973; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 140). Fortunately, the Rehabilitation Act helps students with dyslexia receive special

education services, even if they fail to meet the IDEA's strict requirements for SLD identification. However, researchers indicate that the Sec. 504 alternative is only considered in those states that acknowledge dyslexia as a distinct disorder in language and reading (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 140).

While federal dyslexia policies are characterized by insufficiency, state-level dyslexia policies are "characterized by variability and inconsistency", both in terms of identifying the disorder and the timely provision of interventions (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 133). In 2012, 22 states had statewide dyslexia laws, three of which mandated the creation of a dyslexia handbook to inform educators and parents about best practices for identifying and supporting students with the disorder. Of the remaining states, three had created a dyslexia handbook without a law mandating them to do so, two had designated dyslexia weeks or months to raise awareness about the disorder, and six had dyslexia laws pending in their state legislatures (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134).

Among states with dyslexia laws, policies still vary with respect to early identification, interventions, and accommodations for students with the disorder. Despite evidence for early identification (Ferrer et al., 2015; Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), only a few states have mandated universal dyslexia screening for students in grades K–2 (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138), with several more having released voluntary guidelines for student dyslexia screenings (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139).

Moving beyond identification, dyslexia intervention policies also vary by state, especially with respect to the amount of teacher training schools must provide with respect to intervention strategies. In some states, students with dyslexia receive appropriate interventions in their public schools. Elsewhere, the same students may not receive any additional support if they do not meet the qualifications set by the IDEA, or they may receive interventions that are not appropriate for students with dyslexia (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 141–142). Focusing on teacher training as a key contributor to effective intervention implementation, some states, such as Louisiana, have mandated dyslexia training for general education teachers (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147). However, that is not the case in every state, especially where dyslexia laws are non-existent (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147). This deficit in teacher training is especially concerning in states that classify dyslexia as an SLD. There, researchers report that educators—including reading specialists—may employ strategies that are intended to help all struggling readers without considering the unique needs of students with dyslexia. As described previously,

this means that students with dyslexia “often receive reading instruction with other struggling readers who may not need the same type of instruction (e.g., English language learners, who mostly need vocabulary building activities; students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, who have fallen behind their peers).” By contrast, students with dyslexia tend to need support with “phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, sight word development, and fluency” (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 147–48).

Based on the variability among state-level dyslexia policies, the federal government seems most likely to generate impactful policies for students with dyslexia, beginning with national recognition of the disorder, and then promoting best practices for identification and intervention techniques. Fortunately, the federal government has recently taken on this objective, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus.

Led by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) and Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA), the Caucus has taken several steps to increase dyslexia awareness among educators, parents, and the public. In July of 2015, the members of the Caucus wrote to Assistant Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Michael Yudin, requesting that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) “issue guidance to states and school districts regarding the use of the term ‘dyslexia’” in IDEA documentation (BCDC, 2015, p. 1). As the lawmakers noted, parents found school districts were unwilling to use the term in their children’s Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s), which are written plans “developed to ensure that [a primary or secondary school student] who has a disability identified under the law . . . receives specialized instruction and related services” (Do-It Univ. of Washington, 2015). Instead, school districts were continuing to use ambiguous SLD terminology.

In arguing for the term “dyslexia”, members of Congress emphasized the chief concern about the SLD designation, namely that it is “too vague a description to communicate to a teacher that the child needs intensive, explicit, systematic, evidence-based instruction to make progress.” (BCDC, 2015, p. 1). Responding to the Caucus, Asst. Secretary Yudin issued a letter to state and local education agencies explicitly stating that, “nothing in the IDEA . . . would prohibit the use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia in IDEA evaluation, eligibility determinations, or IEP documents” (Yudin, 2015, p. 1). However, the use of those terms remained at the discretion of state and local education officials.

In February 2016, the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus helped

pass a new federal dyslexia policy, the *Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act* (READ Act; H.R. 3033) (Govtrack, 2016), backed by the parent dyslexia advocacy organization *#SayDyslexia* and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), among other non-profit groups (Tucker, 2016). Originally introduced in the House by Reps. Smith (R-TX) and Brownley (D-CA), the Act supports translational dyslexia research to generate greater awareness of the disorder and provide evidence for best practices with respect to early identification and interventions. The READ Act requires the President's budget request to Congress to include a line item supporting the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Research in Disabilities Education program. It also mandates the NSF to direct \$5 million annually to dyslexia research intended to support early identification strategies, curriculum development, and professional development to raise awareness about dyslexia among educators (READ Act, 2016; BCDC, 2016). Lastly, the Act defines the term "specific learning disability" as follows, with implications to be addressed later in this document.

The term specific learning disability' (1) means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations; (2) includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia; and (3) does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (READ Act, 2016)

While more specific than the previous "general learning disability" designation (Lyon, 2003, p. 2) in federal policy, it is concerning that "specific learning disability" is explicitly defined in the READ Act. This suggests that SLD continues to be the legal and educational standard in federal dyslexia policy, despite being a broad term that encompasses a wide range of behavioral and cognitive learning disabilities, including dyslexia, all of which have unique characteristics (Lyon, 2003, p. 3) requiring unique interventions and accommodations (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147–148).

Returning to the impact of the Dyslexia Caucus, its members—including Co-Chair Rep. Brownley (D-CA), who introduced the READ Act with Rep.

Lamar Smith (R-TX) (BCDC, 2016)—have been instrumental in supporting other Congressional actions to standardize the definition of dyslexia and recognize its educational implications. This aim has been represented through two resolutions, House Resolution 456 (H.R. 456), and Senate Resolution 275 (S. Res. 275). In 2014, Rep. William Cassidy (R-LA) and Rep. Brownley (D-CA) proposed H.R. 456 to define dyslexia and recognize its “significant educational implications” (H.R. 456, 2014). Seeming to address the state-level inconsistencies researchers had noted (Youman & Mather, 2013), H.R. 456 defined dyslexia as follows:

Whereas, defined as an unexpected difficulty in reading in an individual who has the intelligence to be a much better reader, dyslexia reflects a difficulty in getting to the individual sounds of spoken language which typically impacts speaking, reading, spelling, and often, learning a second language (H. Res. 456, 2014)

Although this Resolution would have recognized a national definition of dyslexia in the House of Representatives with considerable support from dyslexia advocacy organizations and research programs (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2014), it failed to pass the House and has not been reintroduced in the current Congressional session (Govtrack, 2014).

Fortunately for students with dyslexia and their supporters, Senate Resolution 275 was passed unanimously by the Senate on October 7, 2015 (Govtrack, 2015). Borrowing language from H.R. 456, S. Res. 275 called on “Congress, schools, and State and local educational agencies to recognize the significant educational implications of dyslexia that must be addressed” (S. Res. 275, 2015) and presented a definition of the disorder that emphasized its phonological underpinnings and unexpectedness relative to a student’s overall cognition. It also emphasized the critical nature of early diagnosis and intervention strategies, reflecting research reviewed in this document (S. Res. 275, 2015). While Senate Resolution 275 has been seen as “game-changing” for dyslexia policy and students with the disorder (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2015), it is important to recognize that simple resolutions like S. Res. 275 do not carry the force of law and only reflect the sentiments of one house of Congress (Lexis Nexis, 2007). As such, stronger federal policy actions will be required to bring order to the tangled web of dyslexia policy (Youman & Mather, 2013).

Overall, this series of legislative actions demonstrates that dyslexia has gained greater recognition in the federal policy landscape. However, the term

“dyslexia” itself—which is unique and entails serious educational implications for students with the disorder—has not risen to the level of law, as the READ Act’s continued focus on “specific learning disability” demonstrates. More broadly, this section has highlighted persistent ambiguity in the definition of dyslexia, potentially a contributing factor to the federal and state policy challenges outlined here. Therefore, the series of recommendations outlined in the following section should help explicitly recognize dyslexia, and ensure that all students with the disorder are identified in a timely manner and provided with the specific special education services they need to achieve academic success.

3. 3-Part Policy Proposal: Overview, Evaluation, and Action Plan

This section of the document will present three policy recommendations that are meant to be implemented progressively, while taking both the variability in state-level dyslexia policy and the growing recognition of dyslexia at the federal level into account. First, policymakers and advocacy organizations should be congratulated for passing the READ Act, but they should maintain their collaboration to ensure implementation that focuses on the central issue of dyslexia’s ambiguous definition and demonstrating its uniqueness among “specific learning disabilities.” Secondly, policymakers and federal Department of Education officials should leverage the power of the READ Act to disseminate the resulting research as best practices through a dyslexia handbook. Finally, this document will recommend amending the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2014) to codify the unique educational needs of students with dyslexia in our nation’s predominant special education law.

First addressing the passage of the READ Act, policymakers and advocacy organizations should be applauded for their efforts, which stand to empower the National Science Foundation to address long-standing ambiguities around dyslexia itself (READ Act, 2016; Katzir & Pare-Blagoev, 2006, p. 58) that have trickled down to generate variability in the dyslexia policy landscape that is detrimental for students with the disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013). However, policymakers must recognize the importance of effective policy implementation. The Act passed with support from the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus, which consists of over 100 members of Congress who are collectively dedicated to “. . . increasing public awareness about dyslexia and ensuring all students have equal educational opportuni-

ties” (BCDC, 2015a). Some of the nation’s largest dyslexia advocacy organizations, including *#SayDyslexia* and the National Center for Learning Disabilities also supported the Act (*#SayDyslexia*, 2015; NCLD, 2015). Specifically, Decoding Dyslexia (*#SayDyslexia*’s parent organization) appreciated the Act’s focus on early identification strategies, professional development for educators, and evidence-based curriculum development, all of which aligned with their policy objectives (BCDC, 2015a; Decoding Dyslexia, 2013).

Although the research funding provided by the READ Act is valuable, it is important to discuss effective policy implementation with a specific focus on dyslexia. As described previously, much of the variability in state-level dyslexia policy, and the apparent need for federal standardization, can be attributed to ambiguity in the definition of the disorder itself. Therefore, the NSF should initially focus on funding basic research to generate a standardized definition of dyslexia before progressing to applied research into early identification, professional development, resource development, and other key areas (READ Act, 2016). Otherwise, the central issue of ambiguity will remain unaddressed, and policies will remain variable. More importantly, the READ Act continues to define—and thereby emphasize—“specific learning disability” as an umbrella term that encompasses dyslexia (READ Act, 2016). Here, effective research-centered implementation of the Act stands to differentiate dyslexia from its SLD counterparts, a result with considerable implications for students with dyslexia and their specific educational needs.

With the passage of the READ Act, subsequent research should ensure a strong foundation of evidence-based methods for students with dyslexia. The next step will be to nationally disseminate those methods to support best practices in early identification, interventions, and professional development across the country. To accomplish this goal, policymakers should leverage the power of the Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus and request that the U.S. Department of Education issue a national educators’ handbook of best practices for students with dyslexia. This would address the lack of high-quality dyslexia handbooks in many states (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 134) and provide a critical resource for educators.

Fortunately, a Department of Education dyslexia handbook would not be without precedent. As described above, the Dyslexia Caucus already spurred Assistant Secretary of Education Michael Yudin to issue a letter to state and local educational agencies about the use of “dyslexia” in IDEA documentation in 2014 (BCDC, 2015b; Yudin, 2015). This suggests a precedent of condition, in that the federal government has recently issued explicit

guidelines pertaining to students with dyslexia. The U.S. Department of Education has also set a methodological precedent. In 2004, the Department contracted with the American Institutes for Research to produce a report titled *Teaching Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Instructional Strategies and Practices*. As a research report, it did not require state and local educational agencies to adopt particular strategies for working with students who had attention disorders, but it did serve as a valuable resource for educators who wanted to ensure that they were using effective interventions (OSERS, 2004, p. 1).

Furthermore, a federal dyslexia handbook should avoid the political pitfalls associated with unfunded mandates, in which the federal government requires state and local governments to comply with a policy but then does not provide adequate financial resources for their compliance (Nivola, 2003). In relative terms, funding should not be a major concern when creating the handbook. Since the 2004 report was produced under an existing contract with the American Institutes for Research, a national dyslexia handbook should be able to be covered by another existing contract with a think tank or research institute. With respect to evaluating the effectiveness of this action, the Department of Education could commission a follow-up study by the research institute that produces the handbook several years after its release. This study would document the handbook's usage by educators, both in terms of frequency and its most valuable resources. The results would shape revisions in future editions of the book, as appropriate.

Lastly, this document recommends amending the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2004) to address the unique needs of students with dyslexia. As previously emphasized, the current version of the law includes dyslexia under the umbrella term of "specific learning disability (SLD)" (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 139), meaning that students with dyslexia may be receiving general interventions that are inappropriate for their unique educational needs (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147–148). This policy action would rely on momentum from Congressional Resolutions, the READ Act and its subsequent research, and national support for best practices generated by the Department of Education dyslexia handbook to formally recognize dyslexia in America's predominant special education law. One key amendment to the IDEA could include the explicit identification of dyslexia—perhaps in conjunction with other learning disabilities—based on the definition of the disorder established in Senate Resolution 275.

After establishing recognition, an amended IDEA could then mandate

universal early identification programs for grades K–2, as researchers (Ferrer et al., 2015) and advocacy organizations (Decoding Dyslexia, 2013) have strongly recommended. Funding for this initiative would likely come from the existing Grants to States Program directed by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, which already assists states in “meeting the excess costs of providing special education and related services to children with disabilities”, focusing on direct interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In this case, the grant monies would support the implementation of early identification and intervention strategies in an educationally and fiscally efficient manner. Lastly, it is important to realize that the effectiveness of an amended IDEA would depend on the success of the two prior recommendations outlined above. Assuming that the IDEA is amended as described here, Congress or the Department of Education could evaluate the effectiveness of their policy change by commissioning researchers to conduct a comprehensive follow-up study. If the situation improves over time with respect to identification of and support for students with dyslexia, that finding should be reflected in the researchers’ report.

4. Conclusion

Surveying the current state of educational policy for students with dyslexia, it is evident that the long-running controversy over the definition of the disorder and appropriate interventions (Katzir & Pare-Blagoiev, 2006) has bred confusion in terms of how to identify these students and best support their educational needs, as demonstrated by the current variability in state-level dyslexia policies. In the midst of this variability, federal education policies like the IDEA have combined students with dyslexia and those with other “specific learning disabilities”, resulting in a situation where students with dyslexia may not receive appropriate educational interventions targeted to their disorder (Youman & Mather, 2013, p. 138, 147-148). Overall, the progressive implementation of the three policy recommendations presented here should contribute to their mutual success. By relying on the growing recognition of dyslexia at the federal level (BCDC, 2016, 2015a, 2015b; READ Act, 2016; Yudin, 2015), these recommendations should collectively help identify and support students with dyslexia across the United States by recognizing their unique educational needs relative to those of students with other learning disabilities, and ultimately allow them to read and achieve in the classroom and beyond.

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Section on Ophthalmology, Council on Children with Disabilities, American Academy of Ophthalmology, American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, and American Association of Certified Orthoptists (2009). Joint Statement—Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, and Vision. *Pediatrics*, 124(2), 837-844.
- Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus. (2015a). Bipartisan READ Act Provides Millions with Dyslexia a Brighter Future. Retrieved from <https://dyslexiacaucus-brownley.house.gov/press-release/bipartisan-read-act-provides-millions-dyslexia-brighter-future>.
- Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus. (2015b). *Letter to Asst. Secretary of Education Michael Yudin on Dyslexia Guidance*. Washington, D.C.: Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus.
- Bipartisan Congressional Dyslexia Caucus. (2016). Bipartisan Dyslexia Bill Heads to President's Desk [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://dyslexiacaucus-brownley.house.gov/press-release/bipartisan-dyslexia-bill-heads-president%E2%80%99s-desk>.
- Decoding Dyslexia. (2013). Decoding Dyslexia Info. Retrieved from <http://www.decodingdyslexia.net/info.html>
- Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology Program at the University of Washington. (2015). What is the Difference Between an IEP and a 504 Plan? DO-IT. Retrieved from <http://www.washington.edu/doi/what-difference-between-iep-and-504-plan>.
- Ferrer, E., Shaywitz, B. A., Holahan, J. M., Marchione, K. E., Michaels, R., & Shaywitz, S. E. (2015). Achievement Gap in Reading is Persistent as Early as First Grade and Persists through Adolescence. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 167, 1121–1125.
- Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2009). Dyslexia: A New Synergy Between Education and Cognitive Neuroscience. *Science*, 325, 280–283.
- Govtrack.us. (2014). H.Res. 456 (113th): Calling on schools and State and local educational agencies to recognize that dyslexia has significant. . . educational implications that must be addressed. Retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hres456>.
- Govtrack.us. (2015). S.Res. 275 (114th): Calling on Congress, schools, and State and local educational agencies to recognize the significant

- educational... implications of dyslexia that must be addressed and designating October 2015 as “National Dyslexia Month”. Retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/sres275>
- Govtrack.us. (2016). H.R. 3033: READ Act. Retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hr3033>.
- H. Res. 456 (2014).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, P.L. 108–446, 20 U.S.C. §1400 (2004).
- Katzir, T., & Pare-Blagoev, J. (2006). Applying Cognitive Neuroscience Research to Education: The Case of Literacy. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(1), 53-74.
- Kavale, K. A. (2001). *Discrepancy Models in the Identification of Learning Disability: Executive Summary*. Paper presented at the Learning Disabilities Summit: Building a Foundation for the Future, Washington, D.C.
- Lexis Nexis. (2007). About Bills, Resolutions, and Laws. Retrieved from https://www.lexisnexis.com/help/CU/Serial_set/AboutBills.htm.
- Lyon, R.G. (1995). Toward a Definition of Dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 45, 3–27.
- Lyon, R.G., Shaywitz, S.E., Shaywitz, B.A., (2003). A Definition of Dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 53, 1–14
- National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2015). READ Act Passes House of Representatives, Expands Research in Dyslexia. Retrieved from <http://www.nclld.org/archives/action-center/what-we-ve-done/read-act-passes-house-of-representatives-expands-research-in-dyslexia>.
- Nivola, P. S. (2003). *Fiscal Millstones on the Cities: Revisiting the Problem of Federal Mandates*. Retrieved from Washington, D.C.: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2003/08/regulation-nivola>.
- Research Excellence and Advancements for Dyslexia Act (READ Act), Pub. L. No. 114-124, 42 U.S.C. §1862r, 1862r-1 (2016).
- S. Res. 275 Cong. Rec. S7106 (2015).
- Say Dyslexia. (2015). #ReadAct Hearing on September 30, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.saydyslexia.org/blog>.
- Shaywitz, S. E., & Shaywitz, B. A. (2014). Make dyslexia a national priority. Retrieved from <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/healthcare/196400-make-dyslexia-a-national-priority>.

- Shaywitz, B. A., & Shaywitz, S. E. (2015). Game-changing U.S. Senate Resolution 275. Retrieved from http://dyslexia.yale.edu/ABOUT_Shaywitz_SenateRes275.html.
- The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, P.L. 93-112, 29 U.S.C. §701 (1973).
- Tucker, G. C. (2016). President Signs READ Act, Funding Research on Dyslexia and Other Learning Issues. Retrieved from <https://www.understood.org/en/community-events/blogs/in-the-news/2016/02/25/president-signs-read-act-funding-research-into-dyslexia-and-other-learning-issues>.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, (2004). Teaching Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Instructional Strategies and Practices, Washington, D.C.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2014). Special Education Grants to States. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepgts/index.html>.
- Youman, M., & Mather, N. (2013). Dyslexia laws in the USA. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 63, 133–153.
- Yudin, M. (2015). U.S. DOE Dyslexia Guidance (United States, Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services).



Hooton, I. (2010, December 10). Dyslexia, conceptual image [Photograph]. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-07/dyslexia-project-shows-what-its-like-to-read-with-the-disorder>

Author

Elias is a rising senior at Swarthmore College, where he is a special major in Psychology and Educational Studies with a minor in Cognitive Science. His research interests are at the intersection of developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and educational policy. Elias is particularly focused on how principles of language acquisition can inform educational policies and shape best practices in school and at home for English Language Learners, as well as other students who face barriers to English literacy.