



# National Center on Improving Literacy

April 26, 2019

The Honorable Bill Cassidy  
520 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Cassidy,

The National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL) thanks you for your leadership on dyslexia in Congress. NCIL is the result of your Herculean effort during Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorization to ensure (a) the availability of solutions to problems facing families and schools that struggle to adequately serve students with dyslexia and (b) that current research and best practices reach the people that need them in an understandable and actionable format.

Dyslexia is the most prevalent type of Specific Learning Disability specified in IDEA 2004. Despite a significant and robust base of peer-reviewed research on screening, identification, and intervention for children at risk for or identified with dyslexia (Seidenberg, 2017; Shaywitz, 2004), school-based services for this large subgroup of children remains inadequate across the nation.

Given that our work is intended for a wide body of stakeholders - parents, district and school professionals, state departments of education, and researchers - we were saddened to find such a scathing rebuttal of our work in your letter to Secretary DeVos. We are available to meet with you in Washington, D.C., Louisiana, in Oregon should you desire to visit the University of Oregon to discuss our work, or in another locale convenient for you.

NCIL is committed to meeting your and other stakeholders' high expectations for the dissemination of evidence-based knowledge and practices regarding individuals with dyslexia. We will continue to work tirelessly to meet these expectations.

Simply stated, our mission at NCIL is to *increase* access to and use of evidence-based approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with or at risk for literacy-related disabilities, especially dyslexia. As you noted in your letter, states vary in the definition of dyslexia they use to guide practice. Currently, 26 states have passed laws that require screening for dyslexia, and 21 states require that some form of intervention occur based on screening results. Several other states address screening for reading disabilities or encourage screening *without a legal requirement*. Because NCIL's charge is to recommend evidence-based practices, the U.S. Department of Education requested that we develop an evidence-informed document addressing key issues in screening for dyslexia risk for schools and districts to consider as they implement policies based on newly adopted state screening legislation that is intended for schools. In response to this request, NCIL authored the March report entitled *Screening for Dyslexia* that



was released online through the NCIL website. The intent of the document was to respond to a pressing national need in the field as opposed to writing an academic paper for a journal.

A fundamental tenet from research on universal screening in schools is that efforts to screen young children for dyslexia must find those who are at risk for developing protracted reading problems. We consider this mandatory. Because of the early age at which screening occurs, prior to students's exposure to much formal schooling, many are at risk for dyslexia. It is important to note that once we identify students *at risk for dyslexia*, schools *must provide immediate and evidence-based explicit instruction and intervention supports* on students' phonemic awareness skills, decoding ability, and fluency skills. We cannot wait for these students to fail to learn these foundational reading and reading-related skills before receiving a formal dyslexia diagnosis and finding a student eligible for special education services.

In your letter to Secretary DeVos, you also raised some important concerns about the report that we would like to address.

**1. Peer review.** In your letter, you questioned the level of peer review used by NCIL when developing the *Screening for Dyslexia* report. As you rightly point out, peer review is a hallmark of science. **We would like to be clear that NCIL engaged in a thorough peer review process throughout the creation of the *Screening for Dyslexia* report.** Before writing the *Screening for Dyslexia* report, NCIL assembled a Dyslexia Technical Work Group with internationally recognized dyslexia scientists with research backgrounds in behavioral, cognitive, or neurological science to respond to and inform our work. We selected members because they led projects currently funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), National Institute of Health (NIH), and National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop and expand the knowledge base for improving outcomes for students with dyslexia. Our members included Dr. Guinevere Eden (Georgetown University), Dr. Jack Fletcher (University of Houston), Dr. Nadine Gaab (Harvard University/Boston Children's Hospital), Dr. John Gabrieli (MIT), Dr. Evelyn Johnson (Boise State University), Dr. Mark Seidenberg (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Dr. Sharon Vaughn (University of Texas at Austin). We also included stakeholders from parent groups, dyslexia advocates, and educational professionals who teach students with dyslexia.

**2. Citations.** Your letter also identified missing citations in the report. We take full responsibility and have taken immediate action to correct this oversight. To maintain scientific rigor, it is critical that a perfect correspondence exists between cited works in the main body of a report and full documentation of cited studies in a reference section. This allows a reader to quickly and easily identify the source material and determine the quality of evidence cited by author(s). As of 4:00 pm on April 23, 2019, an updated version of the document has been posted to the NCIL website with research documentation corrected (<https://improvingliteracy.org/whitepaper/screening-dyslexia>). We are evaluating our editorial process for product dissemination to ensure that this type of oversight does not occur in the future.



**3. The need for more consensus.** Perhaps the most important contribution of your letter is to alert us and other stakeholders to the many definitions of dyslexia and the pressing need for a consensus on the issues concerning a definition of dyslexia. In addition, there is insufficient consensus about the prevalence of dyslexia and standards for calculating prevalence. Finally, there needs to be more consensus about procedures for screening across age and grades, what measures might be feasibly utilized, and how best to interpret data and establish cut points.

*We call for a convening of stakeholders around these three issues to address different viewpoints about definition, prevalence, and screening.* We also hope that we can use a consensus process to build on existing work that illustrates effective instructional practices for preventing and remediating dyslexia, including how dyslexia may be addressed in school systems and what service delivery frameworks are most effective for addressing the instructional needs of children with dyslexia. NCIL is eager and ready to participate in these important conversations.

We sincerely hope to work with you and welcome conversations with you to help ensure that our center's work meets your and others' expectations. We also welcome your input as we continue to work to identify and disseminate best practices for screening and intervention, as well as other issues important for pursuing consensus for increasing positive outcomes for children and adults with dyslexia. With your leadership, we are confident that the convening of key stakeholders around these issues will result in greater consensus and improved services to children with dyslexia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hank Fien".

Hank Fien, Ph.D.  
Director, National Center on Improving Literacy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Yaacov Petscher".

Yaacov Petscher, Ph.D.  
Deputy Director, National Center on Improving Literacy



## References

Seidenberg, M. S. (2017). Dyslexia in a computational model of word recognition in reading. In *Reading acquisition* (pp. 243-273). Routledge.

Shaywitz, S. E. (2004). *Overcoming dyslexia*. New York: Knopf.

Sent via email and regular mail

CC: U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos