



Dyslexia Resource Guide

An Update to Guidance Regarding Characteristics of
Dyslexia and Dyslexia

Tennessee Department of Education | September 2024

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Introduction

Language, barring significant barriers, is a natural process. Reading is not. Reading is a complex process of mapping speech sounds onto symbols of print that requires explicit, systematic instruction for most students. In fact, only about 35% of individuals learn to read easily with broad instruction (Young, 2023). The rest require systematic, explicit instruction to acquire reading skills, and a small percentage require more intensive support. Students who have not mastered basic reading skills by grade 3 are likely to still be behind in grade 8 and then in grade 12 (National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2022).

Reading proficiency is influenced by a number of factors, including neurobiological and environmental in nature. Dyslexia (and associated characteristics) is one of the most common causes of reading struggles and a specific learning disability in basic reading (dyslexia) is a common learning disability (Alexander et al., 2023; International Dyslexia Association (IDA) 2020). Without early intervention and support, students struggling with foundational reading skills, such as phonological and phonemic awareness, sound-symbol correspondence, alphabet knowledge, word identification and decoding, and encoding, are at risk for not meeting proficiency standards in literacy. These students need support in deficit skills, continued access to grade-level standards, high-quality Tier I instruction, and high-quality instructional materials (HQIM).

According to the most recent reports from The Nation's Report Card, national performance in reading has declined in both grades 4 and 8 since last reported in 2019. Tennessee's performance mirrors the national averages, with a decline of about 3 points in both grade 4 and grade 8 scores (NAEP, 2022). Nationally, in 2022, only 32% of students (averaged between grades 4 and 8) were at or above proficiency levels in reading (NAEP, 2022).

The Tennessee Department of Education (department) strives to ensure all students are reading on grade level by grade 3. The department has created the Reading 360 initiative which provides training for teachers in evidence-based reading instruction, home-literacy resources for families, and a free sounds-first curriculum for kindergarten through grade 2. Summer learning camps, TN ALL Corps tutoring, and collaboration with organizations such as the Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN) and The Arc Tennessee are building a state-wide community of invested stakeholders.

The department last updated its *Dyslexia Resource Guide: Guidance on the "Say Dyslexia" Law* in April 2018. The original guide provided information on dyslexia and its characteristics, screening, Response to Instruction and Intervention framework (RTI²), data-based decision making, family resources, and student support, as well as other related areas. This updated guidance adds a focus on how to identify and support students with characteristics of dyslexia in a timely and appropriate manner. In addition to providing a state-wide universal standard of practice for identifying and serving students with characteristics of dyslexia, this guide will provide additional district support for data-based decision making, dyslexia-specific intervention selection, and family resources.

The guide will discuss dyslexia and the characteristics of dyslexia and how the RTI² framework supports the instruction of all learners. Regardless of what student plan a student is being served through, instruction begins in Tier I provided through the RTI² framework. This guide will discuss where students with a specific learning disability in basic reading and/or fluency, such as dyslexia, and where students with characteristics

of dyslexia, or foundational literacy skills gaps, fit into the continuum of services. Additional resources are available through hyperlinks throughout this guide, in the appendices, and on the department's website.

Dyslexia

A Language-Based Disability

The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as “a specific learning disability . . . that is neurobiological in origin. It 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.”

[International Dyslexia Association, 2002](#); see also [Department of Education Rule 0520-12-05-.02\(14\)](#).

Dyslexia is one type of a “specific learning disability.” Tennessee defines a specific learning disability as follows:

The term Specific Learning Disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations and that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Such terms include conditions such as perceptual disabilities (e.g., visual processing), brain injury that is not caused by an external physical force, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific Learning Disability does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of Visual Impairment; Hearing Impairment; Orthopedic Impairment; Intellectual Disability; Emotional Disturbance; Limited English Proficiency; or Environmental or Cultural Disadvantage. (See [Standards for Special Education Evaluation and Eligibility](#).)

Within Tennessee special education eligibility categories, **dyslexia falls under the umbrella category of specific learning disability in basic reading and/or reading fluency**. Not all reading disabilities are dyslexia, but dyslexia and its associated characteristics are one of the most common causes of reading struggles. Not all students with dyslexia or characteristics of dyslexia require special education support, however. Dyslexia is a spectrum ranging in severity, but early identification and intervention is critical when it comes to narrowing the achievement gap. High-quality core instruction paired with early targeted, evidence-based intervention provides students with dyslexia and characteristics of dyslexia the greatest tools for academic and reading success.

Dyslexia occurs across populations regardless of sex, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and language. Dyslexia is not an English-only disorder. In fact, people who use writing systems other than English and even other than alphabetic systems can have dyslexia. Dyslexia is a disorder typically associated with poor phonological (sound) and orthographic (print) processes. Students with dyslexia do not “see” and “read”

letters or words backward. Letter reversals are common and expected during reading development. For some students with dyslexia, this confusion may persist beyond when such errors are expected to be resolved. Not all students with dyslexia reverse letters, but those who do are not “seeing” letters backward; dyslexia is not a vision problem.

Such common myths stem from observed behavior from weaker orthographic memory and phonological deficits. Additionally, children learn from an early age that the orientation of an object in space does not change what it is. A pencil is a pencil whether it is held vertically, horizontally, forward, or backward. When students enter school and are introduced to print, however, this notion is challenged. A *b* flipped on its axis is not still a *b*; it is a *d* or a *q* or even a *p*. A student with dyslexia may see the letter *b* on the page. When that student goes to retrieve the letter from his/her memory and /b/ (the sound of *b*), the connections between sound and print may not support accurate retrieval of the correct grapheme (letter). The student may confuse a similar looking or similar sounding letter instead, such as *d* or *p*. Because it is easier to classify observable behavior (e.g., what we see in the classroom) compared to non-observable processes (e.g., what goes on in the student’s brain), society has developed many myths associated with dyslexia and characteristics of dyslexia. See Appendix A for more common myths regarding dyslexia.

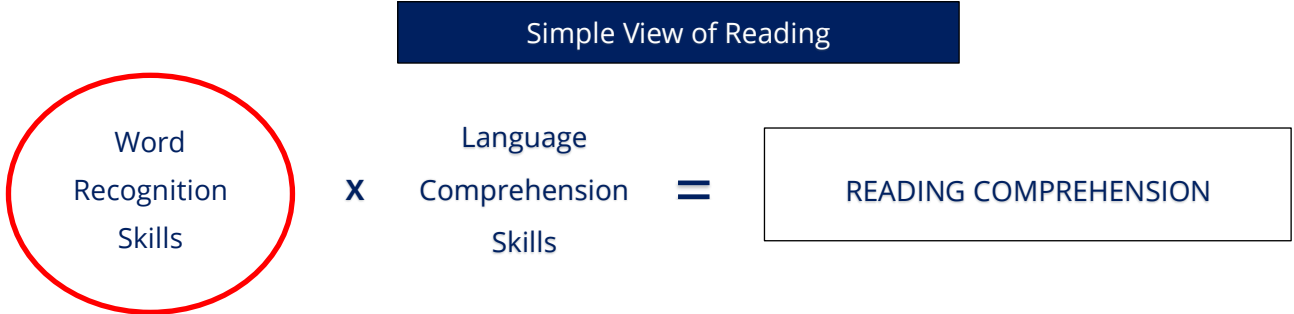
Learning to read is a complex process. Learners must:

- Have language
- Understand that language is a form of communication
- Understand that letters and print represent speech
- Connect letter(s) to speech sounds to blend words
- Connect blended words to known words within individual vocabulary
- Create new meaning or connections if the word does not exist within present vocabulary
- Do this for every word in a sentence
- Make meaning of the sentence
- Track meaning through connected text
- Continue this with texts of varying complexity

When asked to think about how complex reading and comprehending written text is, it is easier to understand why dyslexia is classified as a language-learning disability and not specifically a *reading* disability. Dyslexia affects written language (e.g., reading and writing), but it can also affect other language-based processes. In many cases, the earliest signs of dyslexia are unrelated to printed text. See Appendix B for some common signs of dyslexia and its characteristics at different ages.

Although dyslexia is a language-based disability and early signs may be related to phonological processors, students are typically identified when they struggle to learn to read words, which commonly occurs when students enter formal schooling. Educators must understand many students may struggle to learn to read for a variety of reasons that are unrelated to dyslexia. “The Simple View of Reading” is one of the more commonly known theories or views regarding learning to read (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough,

1990). Basically, *word recognition* (previously decoding) multiplied by *language comprehension* skills equals *reading comprehension*. This means that if a student has a zero in any part of that equation, the result will be zero independent reading comprehension. Additionally, if any student has less than one in any part of that equation, then reading comprehension is still less than that of a proficient comprehending reader.



The Simple View of Reading also presents four general reading profiles. Each quadrant represents a reading profile, but as students could fall anywhere within the continuum, this model also represents the spectrum of reading ability. In general, the Simple View of Reading purports that students can be poor decoders with good oral language comprehension, poor decoders with poor oral language comprehension, good decoders with poor oral language comprehension, and good decoders with good oral language comprehension. Students who fall into quadrant of poor decoders with good oral language comprehension demonstrate reading skills suggestive of dyslexia or characteristics of dyslexia. However, educators should note that **persistence** in poor decoding skills **despite** high-quality, targeted, and evidence-based instruction and Intervention is an important piece of the puzzle.

Summary

Dyslexia is a language-based disability that affects a person’s written language, typically both reading and writing. Some indicators of dyslexia may be apparent before a person ever encounters written language (see Appendix B), but dyslexia and characteristics of dyslexia are most identified when a learner struggles to decode and spell words despite appropriate instruction. This deficit in word recognition separates dyslexia from other reading disabilities and as illustrated in the Simple View of Reading, other reasons for reading struggle. Many learners will need some level of explicit and systematic instruction to learn to read, and some student struggles will persist despite appropriate instruction. These students who continue to struggle with word-level foundational skills despite high-quality instruction are the students who are likely to be identified as having dyslexia and/or to need additional support, including extensive practice and application opportunities and more specialized instruction.

While learners can struggle for reasons that are not related to dyslexia, phonological and orthographic processors function differently when someone has dyslexia, which makes the connections between speech and print difficult to master. Dyslexia, though, is not one size fits all; learners range a spectrum from more

minor to significant. Early identification and the provision of appropriate supports are critical in minimizing the effects of dyslexia on reading development and academic progress.



Response to Intervention and Instruction (RTI²)

RTI² Overview

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) is a framework designed to meet the needs of all students through high-quality instruction and increasingly intensive interventions. With RTI², all students receive Tier I instruction. Some students may need more targeted support to engage with Tier I content and materials through Tier II instruction, intervention, learning acceleration, or enrichment, while a few students may need more intensive skills-based interventions in addition to Tier I instruction through Tier III supports. As outlined in Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 districts must identify characteristics of dyslexia through their existing RTI² universal screening process and provide appropriate tiered dyslexia-specific interventions for students identified with these characteristics.

Tier I

Tier I instruction, also known as core instruction, provides rich learning opportunities for all students that are aligned to the Tennessee academic standards and are responsive to student strengths and needs through the use of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), embedded access points, and purposeful instructional scaffolds. The entire range of learners, including those identified with disabilities, students with characteristics of dyslexia, students who are identified as gifted, and English learners, actively participate in Tier I instruction. Varying levels of support, based on multiple sources of data, is a hallmark of Tier I.

Tiers II and III

Tiers II and III address the needs of struggling students and can address the needs of advanced students as well. Those students who require assistance beyond the usual time allotted for Tier I instruction should receive additional opportunities for instructional support or intensive intervention aligned to the specific area of need. Advanced students should receive reinforcement and enrichment. Intervention includes explicit instruction within the area of need for all struggling students. For example, students with the characteristics of dyslexia should receive interventions that address the specific deficits identified through targeted assessments.

When teachers and school-level RTI² support teams are making placement decisions for tiered interventions and support, school-based teams should consider various forms of assessments, data, and information on the student. Such examples may include classroom-based and/or formative assessments, attendance records, past retention, performance on Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), and family history of reading and learning difficulties. Students at this level should receive targeted support in a small group or individual intervention targeting specific area(s) of deficit. Students who have received Tier I instruction and/or tiered interventions and continue to show marked difficulty in acquiring necessary reading, mathematics, and writing skills may need increased intensity in their intervention programming. Intensity can be increased through length, frequency, and duration of implementation. A problem-solving approach within an RTI² model is highly recommended so that the data team can tailor an intervention to an individual student. It typically has four stages: problem identification, analysis of problem, intervention planning, and response to intervention evaluation.



Intervention includes explicit instruction within the area of need for all struggling students. For example, students with the characteristics of dyslexia should receive interventions that address the specific related deficits identified through targeted assessments.

If a student is suspected of having a disability at any time during their participation in the RTI² framework (including Tier I), the student must be referred for evaluation to consider eligibility for special education. See “Special Education and Section 504” section later in this guide for more information on referral processes.

Universal Reading Screener (URS)

All students are served through the RTI² framework, and this framework includes Tier I instruction in the general education classroom. Assessing students for characteristics of dyslexia begins in the general education classroom and is accomplished through the universal reading screening (URS) process.

RTI² is a process focused on prevention and early intervention that uses multiple sources of data for increasing access to Tier I instruction, learning acceleration, intervention, and transitions between tiers. Ongoing assessment is a major component of the RTI² framework, which includes the universal screening process and formative assessments in Tier I to inform data-based decision making. The requirement that districts must implement RTI² has resulted in districts establishing a universal screening process that best meets the needs of their students. This process should use multiple sources of data to identify individual student strengths and areas of need and that provides them with accurate information for making informed decisions about skills-specific interventions, gap closure through learning acceleration, re-teaching, and enrichment for each child.

For the URS process, districts should administer a nationally normed, skills-based universal screener three times a year as part of the universal screening process in grades K – 6 and a minimum of one time a year for grades 7 – 8. According to Hughes & Dexter (2011), a nationally normed skills-based universal screener is necessary because relying only on local performance could give a false impression of student proficiency. Universal screeners are not assessments in the traditional sense. They are brief, informative tools used to measure academic skills in six general areas (i.e., basic reading skills, reading fluency, reading comprehension, math calculation, math problem solving, and written expression). For additional information related to K-3 universal reading screener guidelines, please reference the TN Universal Reading Screener Administration Guidelines.

Per the Tennessee Literacy Success Act, all students in kindergarten through grade 3 must participate in a universal screening process to identify those who may need additional support and/or other types of instruction, interventions, and suggestions for at home activities to support learning. See Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-905 and the [Tennessee Foundational Literacy Toolkit](#) resources for additional guidance. The universal screening process also plays an important role in fulfilling the requirements of Tennessee's dyslexia legislation, codified at Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229. Passed during the 2016 legislative session, this law requires that districts implement a screening process for identifying characteristics of dyslexia. Districts with an appropriate, effective universal screening process in place will be able to use the information they collect to make important determinations about dyslexia-specific class-level support and interventions. Processes required under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 are discussed in detail throughout this guide.

Information from the URS and additional data sources can further inform data-based decision-making regarding classroom support and intervention placement. The URS window occurs 3 times per school year with one administration each in the Fall, Winter, and Spring. Requirements for how frequently students must be screened can vary by grade band. Districts and public charter schools should reference the RTI²

Manual for administrative guidelines, as well as the 23-24 Minimum URS Matrix Administrative Guidelines documents for K – 3 and for 4 – 8, and the URS Minimum Matrix for K – 3, 4 – 8, and 9 – 12 for more information.

In grades 9-12, schools should collect multiple sources of data that can be incorporated into an early warning system (EWS). The EWS may include data from universal screeners, achievement tests (from both high school and grades K-8), End-of-Course (EOC) exams, student records (e.g., grades, behavioral patterns, attendance, retention, and past RTI² interventions), Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) student score projections, and the ACT/SAT exam or other nationally normed assessments. EWS should include an attendance indicator, a behavior indicator (discipline history, et cetera), and an academic competencies indicator. Other factors included in EWS are for the district to decide. (Note: A template can be found on the department's [RTI² webpage under the Educator tab](#).) Districts will establish criteria for identifying students who are at-risk using this EWS by determining appropriate thresholds for each indicator (e.g., missing ten percent of instructional days may be a flag for attendance) and weighting each indicator to appropriately differentiate students based on local context (e.g., student population and school improvement plan goals). Students who flag for risk on the EWS should be considered for additional screeners, survey-level assessments, necessary classroom supports, and interventions as determined appropriate by the school-based decision-making team.

Summary

RTI² is a general education framework designed to support all learners. The URS process is at the foundation and core of a successful RTI² framework. The URS helps to identify students at risk for academic struggle. Students who are struggling to meet grade level expectation measured on the URS should be administered additional diagnostic assessments and placed in appropriate interventions and provided necessary classroom supports. The URS process drives early identification and the provision of appropriately aligned instructional support and interventions. LEAs must have procedures for screening students for characteristics of dyslexia within their URS process.

Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229

Overview

Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229, which took effect in 2016, sets forth requirements for LEAs regarding the identification and service of students with characteristics of dyslexia through appropriate interventions, which may be dyslexia-specific, and details out processes for screening students with survey-level, drill-down assessments who flag for risk on the universal reading screener. Screening for characteristics of dyslexia is to take place as part of the universal screening process through existing RTI² procedures or other available means. Every LEA must screen for dyslexia, and dyslexia screening procedures should include

phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, sound symbol recognition, decoding skills, rapid automatized naming, and encoding skills.

If a dyslexia screener indicates that a child has characteristics of dyslexia, then the LEA must:

- notify the student's parent or legal guardian;
- provide the student's parent or legal guardian with information and resource material regarding dyslexia;
- provide the student with appropriate tiered dyslexia-specific intervention through its RTI² framework; and
- monitor the student's progress using a tool designed to measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

See [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229](#).

"Risk" is not defined in Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229. Districts may define what constitutes risk on the overall universal reading screening score, although the student's parent or guardian, teacher, counselor, or school psychologist can also request dyslexia screening. Note, dyslexia screening under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 is screening within the general education setting that helps inform instructional and intervention decision making. Screening a student for characteristics of dyslexia at this level does not constitute a referral to special education or categorize the student as having a suspected disability. Dyslexia screening within the universal reading screening process is an indication that the student is showing risk for skill gaps in foundational literacy skills for which they may require targeted support. Because student learning profiles vary, not all students with such gaps will perform the same on universal screeners. For this reason, schools must include processes for identifying risk factors in any student who may need additional assessment, which includes the ability for stakeholders to ask for further screening.

For example, a student may score at the 40th percentile on the overall URS composite score, which places the student near or in the average range for performance. However, the student struggles with word reading accuracy and spelling as noted by the student's teacher and the student took much longer than other students to complete the screener. The teacher has concerns about the student's foundational skills and asks for further survey-level, or drill down, screening. This example is just one scenario in which school-based data teams would need to consider multiple sources of data to determine if a student may require further testing in order to place them appropriately within RTI². Detailed information on survey-level assessments compared to universal screeners is provided in the "Screening and Assessment" section.

For students who are screened for characteristics of dyslexia and found to have deficits in foundational literacy skills, school-based teams must determine the most appropriate intervention support for that student. Students with characteristics of dyslexia may require dyslexia-specific interventions within tiered support in the RTI² framework. Dyslexia-specific interventions are discussed in more detail later in this guide.

Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 works within the RTI² framework to screen, identify, and serve students in the general education setting.

The Tennessee Literacy Success Act

Overview

The Tennessee Literacy Success Act (TLSA) took effect in 2021 with the goal of improving Tennessee literacy through appropriate screening, early identification, high-quality instruction, targeted intervention, and aligned assessments of student progress, performance, and achievement. The use of universal reading screener tools and data reporting by LEAs and public charter schools is mandated by TLSA for students in kindergarten through grade 3. See [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-905](#).

The TLSA supports the screening and identification of kindergarten through grade 3 students at risk for a significant reading deficiency and for students who have a significant reading deficiency. The State Board of Education (SBE) defines a “significant reading deficiency” as a student who scores at or below the 15th percentile on one of the state-board approved universal reading screeners. See [State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-03-.15\(1\)\(c\)](#). For grades 4 and 5, a student would be determined to have a significant reading deficiency if the student scores below proficient on the most recently administered English Language Arts (ELA) TCAP assessment. The State Board of Education defines being “at risk for significant reading deficiency” as a student scoring between the 16th and the 40th percentiles on a nationally normed universal reading screener. See [State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-03-.15\(1\)\(d\)](#).

To ensure the literacy development and reading success of Tennessee students, the TLSA requires all LEAs to implement foundational literacy instruction in K -3 utilizing high-quality instructional materials for all learners. In addition, the law requires that all students identified as having a significant reading deficiency receive appropriate intervention through the RTI² framework. See [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-905](#). Refer to the [RTI² Manual](#) for definitions of interventions and how these can occur in Tier I, II, or III of the RTI² framework.

The criteria outlined in SBE rule should be used as a guideline for districts to help determine risk and indicate a student as a priority student for summer programming; **these parameters are not prescriptive cut-offs for student placement and decision making**. Multiple sources of data should be used to make instructional and intervention decisions. However, these percentile guidelines do inform certain parent communication requirements.

Upon determining that a student in kindergarten through grade 3 has a significant reading deficiency, based on the results of the universal reading screener most recently administered to the student, the LEA or public charter school shall notify the student's parent in writing that the student has been identified to have a significant reading deficiency, and shall provide the student's parent with

- Information about the importance of a student being able to read proficiently at the end of the third-grade level;

- Reading intervention activities that the parent may use with the parent's student at home to improve reading proficiency;
- Information about the specific reading interventions and supports that the LEA or public charter school recommends for the student, which may include the interventions provided by the LEA or public charter school pursuant to Tennessee's RTI² framework manual; and
- Information about mandatory retention under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-3115(a)(1) for students in grade three (3) with an achievement level of “approaching” or “below” on the ELA portion of the student's most recent TCAP test.

See [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-905\(d\)](#). Home Literacy Reports are required for all students identified with a significant reading deficiency (15th percentile and below) and recommended for those at-risk (between the 16th and the 40th percentile). See [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-905\(e\)](#). [The Foundational Literacy Skills Toolkit](#) contains more information on district requirements of Tennessee Literacy Success Act.

Home Literacy Reports should include:

- information about the importance of a student being able to read proficiently at the end of the third-grade level;
- reading intervention activities that the parent may use with their student at home to improve reading proficiency; and
- information about the specific reading interventions and supports that the LEA or public charter school recommends for the student, which may include the interventions provided by the LEA or public charter school pursuant to Tennessee’s RTI² framework manual.

For students identified as needing dyslexia-specific intervention due to skill deficits in areas associated with characteristics of dyslexia, parent communication must also include information and resources related to dyslexia.

Summary

Both Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 and the Tennessee Literacy Success Act and accompanying [Tennessee State Board of Education Rule Chapter 0520-01-03](#) require LEAs to screen students in reading and to identify students at risk for foundational literacy deficits. Additionally, both laws require LEAs to make data-based decisions for students in the RTI² framework, to notify parents, and to monitor progress.

Characteristics of Dyslexia and RTI²

The Dyslexia Resource Guide update creates a consistent statewide model for identifying and supporting students with characteristics of dyslexia. Students with unique learning needs include students with disabilities (SWD), students with characteristics of dyslexia, and English learners (EL). Students may qualify for multiple avenues of support, depending on need.

This guide will ensure that districts and public charter schools have a clear understanding of the concept of “characteristics of dyslexia” and can distinguish this concept from a special education eligibility determination or eligibility for a Section 504 plan.

In addition, the guide will discuss student intervention plans (SIPs), research-based support for struggling readers, including those that may be ELs or SWDs, and resources for family support.

Characteristics of Dyslexia

“Characteristics of dyslexia” is a defined term in Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 that covers a student’s struggle with foundational reading skills, such as phonological and phonemic awareness, sound-symbol recognition, alphabet knowledge, decoding, encoding, and rapid automatized naming. Students who flag for risk on the universal reading screener, who receive additional assessment for skill gaps in foundational literacy skills, and who are found to have deficits in foundational literacy skills may require dyslexia-specific interventions.

Any student served in Tiers II or III of RTI² should receive a student intervention plan (SIP) that outlines the student’s present data, intervention placement, and progress monitoring plan. Since there is not a required template for SIPs, districts can use discretion on how SIPs are documented. However, school-based teams should have documented data on students placed into skills-based interventions.

LEAs should universally screen all students, identify risk, and then make data-based decisions regarding most appropriate supports for student need. This is the same process regardless of which type of student plan ultimately support them.

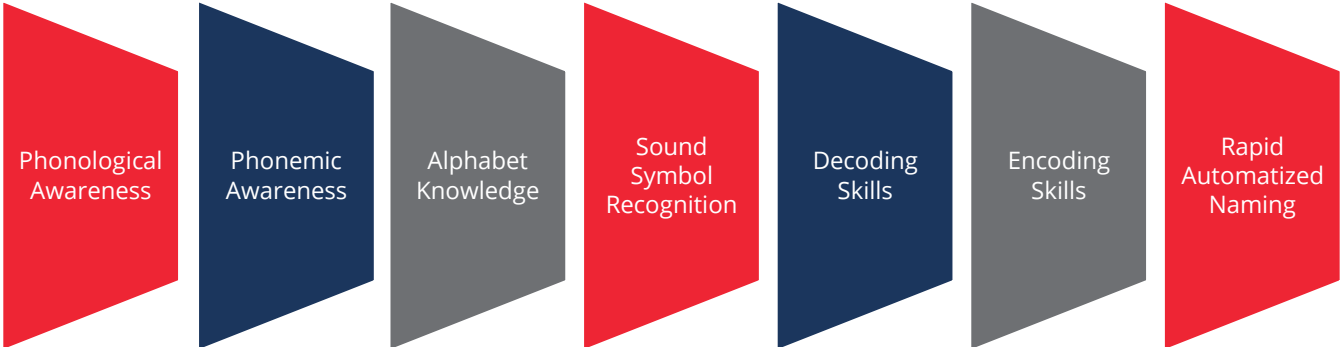
For more information on the screening process itself, including survey-level assessment procedures for screening for dyslexia, reference the “Screening and Assessment” section of this guide.

Reference the graphic on the next page for an illustration of the process of screening students and determining appropriate supports.

Universal Reading Screener
Skills-based, Grade-appropriate Literacy Screening (K – 8)
Early Warning System (9 – 12)



For students who flag for risk on the URS (or for whom characteristics of characteristics of dyslexia screening is requested), URS data is analyzed and/or additional skills-based assessments are administered, which may include the following areas:



Analysis of data is used to determine if the student is struggling with reading due to deficits at the word-level (e.g., not comprehension-specific, not due solely to inadequate instruction, et cetera).



Districts use data-based decision making to determine intervention placement, instructional scaffolds, and Tier I access requirements for ALL students based on individual need.

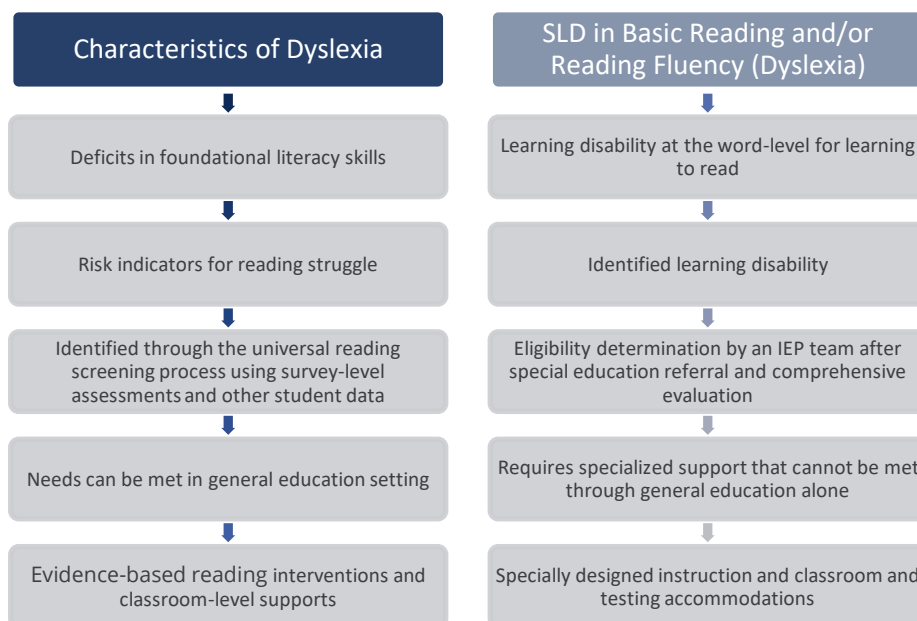
Students identified with characteristics of dyslexia must be placed in a dyslexia-specific intervention. All students in Tier II or III intervention receive a student intervention plan.

Specific Learning Disability in Basic Reading

In contrast to “characteristics of dyslexia” as defined under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229, dyslexia “is a specific learning disability” as defined earlier in this guide. See [International Dyslexia Association, 2002](#); see also [Department of Education Rule 0520-12-05-.02\(14\)](#).

Students with dyslexia **may** be eligible for special education and related services under IDEA and state special education law and served through an IEP (Individualized Education Program). **When eligible for special education and related services, students with dyslexia fall under the disability category of specific learning disability in basic reading and/or reading fluency.** To be eligible under IDEA and state special education law, students must meet two sets of requirements. First, the student must meet the [Tennessee State Board of Education Standards for Evaluation and Eligibility for Specific Learning Disability](#), and second, the disability in question must have an adverse educational impact that cannot be addressed through normal classroom-level support, instructional scaffolds, and other reasonable considerations. In other words, some students with identified dyslexia may require an IEP, and some may not. Additional information about dyslexia and some common myths surrounding the disability are available later in this guide (see Appendix A). For information about dyslexia and special education, including parent referrals, outside evaluations, and school-based assessments for special education, see “Special Education and Section 504” later in this guide. For more information on characteristics of dyslexia versus dyslexia, please reference the graphic below as well as the department resource “[Characteristics of Dyslexia and Dyslexia: Differences and Implications.](#)”

Characteristics of Dyslexia vs. Specific Learning Disability



504s

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) is a broad civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) also prohibits discrimination based on disability in public entities. Section 504 guarantees that a child with a disability has access to an education comparable to the education provided to a nondisabled child. For some children, this may require the development of a 504 plan. LEAs may want to consider if a Section 504 evaluation is warranted for students who are identified as having characteristics of dyslexia under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229, though not all students who struggle with foundational literacy skills will meet eligibility for a Section 504 plan. Note, being identified with “characteristics of dyslexia” does not constitute an evaluation under a Section 504 plan. However, if a student identified with characteristics of dyslexia is struggling with the current supports provided, and the team suspects the student may qualify for a Section 504 plan for dyslexia, a team should evaluate. See the department’s [“Dyslexia and Section 504: Evaluation and Eligibility”](#) resource for more guidance.

English Learners

An English Learner (EL) is a non-English language background (NELB) student who qualifies for English as a Second Language (ESL) services through a Tennessee Department of Education-approved English Language Proficiency screener. See [State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-22-.01\(4\)](#). ELs in TN will have an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP), which is a document developed pursuant to [Chapter 0520-01-19 of the State Board of Education Rules](#) that prescribes the academic goals, supports, and/or accommodations that an EL student needs to access classroom instruction and to improve English language proficiency.

In addition to ELs having an ILP, LEAs shall ensure that EL students suspected of having characteristics of dyslexia are screened and served in accordance with Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 and Chapter 0520-01-22 of the State Board of Education Rules. See [State Board of Education Rule 0520-01-22-.02\(g\)](#). When conducting screenings for characteristics of dyslexia, LEAs shall consider the English language proficiency of EL students in determining the appropriate assessments and other evaluation materials to be used. EL students shall not be identified as having characteristics of dyslexia solely because of their limited English language proficiency. If an English Learner is identified as having characteristics of dyslexia, the EL must receive both ESL and intervention services. For more information on developing ILPs for ELs grade K-12 and ILPs for Transitional students Year 1 and Year 2, please see the [Individualized Learning Plan Manual \(ILP\)](#).

Summary

Students struggle with reading for a variety of factors, but the most common reading struggles stem from inability to access the text on the page due to foundational reading deficits. Students who struggle with basic reading skills, such as those related to the sounds of language (phonological and phonemic awareness), the relationship between speech and print (sound-symbol correspondence and alphabet knowledge), and the accurate identification and reading of words (decoding) and spelling words (encoding),

are at risk of not becoming proficient readers and writers. Through streamlined communication and screening procedures, as well as uniform identification standards, districts can appropriately identify struggling readers with characteristics of dyslexia and serve them through targeted interventions in a timely manner. Understanding what the category of “characteristics of dyslexia” is and is not can help districts best serve students with this reading profile.

Continued access to grade-level standards and high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) is crucial to continued language and vocabulary development, as well as the literacy reasoning skills necessary to support comprehension of rigorous text, the critical analysis of concepts and ideas, and the development of proficient readers and thinkers. In addition to HQIM, to ensure access to high-quality literacy instruction, educators should use access points (embedded suggestions in the curriculum), and instructional scaffolds (temporary supports) to bridge a student to the learning. The integration of high-quality Tier I instruction and appropriate interventions is essential to ensure that skill deficit gaps are closed, and grade-level learning is accelerated.

Screening and Assessment

Grade-Appropriate Skills

Seven areas are identified in Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 in which students with characteristics of dyslexia typically exhibit deficits. Screeners at different grades assess different skills based on the expectations of that developmental age. Therefore, while students in any grade may have deficits in any of these areas, not all skills are screened for at all grades. Below, the seven skills are defined and explained. Universal reading screeners norm students against similarly aged peers. Note that while not all skills are directly assessed at all grades, screeners are designed to assess students with tasks that utilize prerequisite skills. Students with characteristics of dyslexia are often performing below grade level on skill sets related to foundational reading. This is why additional survey-level, or drill-down, assessment to pinpoint specific skill gaps is so important, which is discussed later.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is a broad category comprising a range of understandings related to the sounds of words and word parts. For example, individuals with phonological awareness understand the concept of rhyme, can count the words in a sentence, and can break words into syllables.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech. Students with developed phonemic awareness, depending on age, can isolate beginning, medial, and final sounds in words, can segment words into their individual phonemes, and can isolate and manipulate sounds in words to create new words. Phonemic awareness is expected to be fully developed by the age of 10 (Moats & Tolman, 2009).

Alphabet Knowledge

Alphabet knowledge is the general understanding that letters represent sounds, which form words. Alphabet knowledge encompasses basic print awareness, letter identification, and alphabet sequence as well.

Sound-symbol Recognition

Sound-symbol recognition is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (sounds in spoken language) and graphemes (the letters that represent those sounds). Sound-symbol recognition begins with 1:1 correspondence and grows to include phonics patterns of multiple letters.

Decoding Skills

Decoding skills is a set of skills that involves using knowledge of letters and sounds to recognize and analyze printed words to make connections to the spoken words they represent. This also can be referred to as word attack skills. Not all words are decodable but almost all words include at least some decodable features that can aid students in deciphering unknown and unfamiliar words.

Encoding Skills

Encoding skills, or spelling, is the translation of speech into writing. To spell a word, students must have foundational phonological and phonemic skills, as well as alphabet knowledge and the necessary sound-symbol correspondence knowledge for the target word. Strong orthographic representations support the act of spelling.

Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN)

Rapid naming is the ability to connect visual and verbal information by giving the appropriate names to common objects, colors, letters, and digits (quickly naming what is seen). Reading requires the retrieval of phonological information related to phonemes (letter/letter combination sounds), segments of words, and words from long-term memory in an efficient manner. RAN is a performance task that relates to processing, and deficits in RAN can be predictive of the development of such reading skills as reading fluency and automatic word recognition. Rapid naming can support the decoding and encoding of words, the reading of sight words, and the fluent, automatic reading of connected text. Unlike the above skills, RAN is not a “skill” that can be intervened upon through direct instruction. However, other areas affected by RAN can be (e.g., reading fluency, word identification and decoding).

The Minimum Universal Reading Screening Matrix

The minimum matrices for all grades detail the assessments required by districts to be administered during each tri-annual window. Some measures are not required during each window and F, W, and S are used to indicate Fall, Winter, and Spring requirements. Each matrix includes all seven State Board-approved

screeners and the grade(s) listed at the top. Districts should utilize these documents to ensure that they are administering all required subtests for each grade during each screening window. Some subtests on the minimum matrices are required for all students, and some are recommended only for those whose overall URS score indicates risk for reading struggle. Encoding and rapid automatized naming, as indicated by grade, is not required for every student. However, these subtests can provide useful information on student ability. Depending on the use of the data, districts may need to administer all subtests on the matrix to students with identified risk indicators, but the assessments on the Minimum URS Matrix are not an exhaustive list of the subtests that may be needed to appropriately screen a student for characteristics of dyslexia. However, many subtests listed on the Minimum URS Matrix do assess the areas required under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229. School-based teams must determine which assessments are appropriate and necessary to fulfill characteristics of dyslexia screening beyond those listed on the Minimum URS Matrix for the student’s grade.

Reference the 2023-24 URS Administrative Guidelines for [K-3](#) and [4-8](#) for detailed guidance on which subtests are required for all students versus those recommended for students identified as at risk. See the following section on survey-level assessments for more information on dyslexia screening.

Below is a snapshot illustrating the components of the minimum matrix described above.

Minimum URS Matrix KINDERGARTEN

Reading Measure	aimswebPlus	i-Ready Suite	DIBELS 8th Edition	easyCBM	MAP Suite	Star Assessment Suite	FastBridge Suite/FAST
Basic Reading Skills: The ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds in language, identify printed letters and their associated sounds, and decode written language. Basic reading skills relate to the foundational skills of phonological and phonemic awareness, sound-symbol correspondence,	Initial Sounds (F) Letter Naming Fluency (F, W, S) Letter Word Sound Fluency (F, W, S) Phoneme Segmentation (W, S)	Diagnostic Phonics and Phonological Awareness Domains (F, W, S)	Letter Naming Fluency (F, W, S) Phonemic Segmentation (F, W, S) Nonsense Word Fluency (F, W, S)	Letter Name (F) Letter Sounds (F, W, S) Phoneme Segmenting (F, W, S)	MAP Growth Reading K-2 Outcome: Overall RIT Score (F, W, S)	Star Early Literacy: Phonics and Phonological Awareness Domain (F, W, S)	earlyReading Concepts of Print (F) earlyReading Letter Name (F) earlyReading Onset Sounds (F, W) earlyReading Letter Sounds (F, W, S) earlyReading Word Segmenting (W, S) earlyReading

For students in kindergarten through grade 3, the data collected from the universal reading screener, with the exception of encoding and RAN, must be reported to the department pursuant to the Tennessee Literacy Success Act. See the [URS Administration Guidelines](#) for more information on the administration of the universal reading screener and data reporting requirements for K – 3.

Survey-Level Assessments

Survey-level assessments are informal probes or tools used to drill down to specific skills in order to pinpoint a student’s present levels of performance, mastery, or ability in regard to those skills. The information gained from universal screeners allows school-based teams to 1) know where a student is

performing compared to normative samples (same grade peers) and 2) understand that a student is struggling in skills related to the general area being evaluated. Universal screeners, however, are not designed to provide discrete information on student skills. When universal screeners indicate risk or cause for concern (i.e., the student is not performing well in the area of reading compared to peers), LEAs will need more information in order to 1) determine if there are more foundational deficits influencing performance on the universal screener and 2) align instruction and intervention to student need. Additionally, such assessments may be necessary to administer in order to execute the requirements pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229 in the screening for characteristics of dyslexia, depending on grade level.

Drill down, or survey-level, assessments are assessments designed to pinpoint discrete skill areas. While some universal screeners do *provide* data on specific skills, survey-level assessments are designed to *target* specific skills. Universal screeners focus on grade-appropriate content which may require learners to use skills to complete tasks, but survey-level assessments focus on the skill specifically. For example, an oral reading fluency measure given through a screening tool relies on the use of decoding skills and rapid automatized naming, but it does not measure them directly. A word-level phonics battery, on the other hand, does measure decoding skills in a way that provides diagnostic information about what a learner can and cannot do in that skill area.

Additionally, universal screeners are designed to be grade-appropriate. Students who are struggling with reading skills are often performing below grade-level. Performance on universal screeners can tell educators that a student is struggling compared to same age peers, but it cannot provide enough information to inform instructional needs. Survey-level assessments allow the gathering of data on skills themselves and a student's ability to perform against criteria.

Universal reading screeners can answer the question, Is the student struggling with reading?

Survey-level assessments, however, can answer the following and more, depending on the assessment:

- Can the student recognize and/or produce rhyme?
- Is the student struggling with decoding consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words?
- Does the student understand that doubling a consonant protects a short vowel?
- Can the student read vowel-consonant-E (VCe) words accurately, recognizing that the silent *e* creates a long vowel?
- Can the student segment the individual sounds or phonemes in words with five sounds?
- Does the student have difficulty analyzing and segmenting the sounds in consonant blends (e.g., *bl-*, *cr-*, *-nk*)? Does it matter if the blend is at the beginning or end of the word?
- Can the student accurately encode phonics patterns that have been explicitly taught?
- Does the student understand the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and letters (graphemes) and which ones?

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229, LEAs must have procedures in place within the universal reading screening process to further evaluate students in phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, alphabet

knowledge, sound-symbol recognition, decoding skills, rapid automatized naming, and encoding skills, as determined necessary.

Districts can talk to the vendor of their district-selected screener to determine what survey-level or dyslexia screening tools are available outside of those included in the Minimum URS Matrix. Additional criterion-referenced and skills-based measures can be utilized to gather necessary information to make determinations regarding characteristics of dyslexia.

The PWRS and the PASS, a test of decoding and related skills and a test of phonological and phonemic awareness respectively, are available on the department's [website](#) using the password *fastestimproving*.

Intervention Placement

Once screening and additional assessment is completed, LEAs and school-based teams should use the variety of data available to determine how best to meet student need. When a student's data profile for reading indicates characteristics of dyslexia, these students may require more specialized intervention support through dyslexia-specific interventions. Regardless of the plan a student is served through, ensuring students with characteristics of dyslexia are receiving appropriate interventions necessary classroom-level support is the responsibility of districts. In regard to dyslexia-specific interventions, LEAs should

- Assess and choose dyslexia-specific interventions that meet the criteria outlined by the department,
- Determine if additional survey-level assessments or other data are needed to determine student need, and
- Identify deficits and appropriately aligning interventions to individual need.

Dyslexia-Specific Interventions

The majority of students require explicit and systematic instruction in literacy to learn how to read (Young, 2023) and all can benefit from it. Tennessee's use of sounds-first instruction in Tier I is aligned to the science of reading and meets the criteria for explicit and systematic curriculum. However, some students may continue to struggle even with high-quality research-based instruction and explicit, systematic lessons. These students can learn how to read but require more intensive support, higher numbers of repetitions, and more practice opportunities. Therefore, students who have been identified as having characteristics of dyslexia through the LEA's dyslexia screening procedures should be placed in dyslexia-specific interventions.

Dyslexia-specific interventions must meet the following criteria:

- **explicit** – skills explained, directly taught, and modeled by the teacher,
- **systematic and cumulative** – introduces concepts in a definite, logical sequence; concepts are ordered from simple to more complex,

- **multi-sensory** – links listening, speaking, reading, and writing together; involves movement and “hands-on” learning,
- **language-based** – addresses all levels of language, including sounds (phonemes), symbols (graphemes), meaningful word parts (morphemes), word and phrase meanings (semantics), and sentence formation (syntax), and
- **aligned to individual student need** – should address the skill deficit(s) identified through targeted assessments.

Students who receive in dyslexia-specific interventions have exhibited deficits in foundational reading skills, which may include phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, sound-symbol recognition, decoding, encoding, and rapid naming. Struggling readers with characteristics of dyslexia may have deficits in some or all these areas and choosing an intervention that aligns to student individual need requires that the school-based team have knowledge of the child’s skills.

As previously discussed, screeners may not provide enough information to inform specific instructional needs, and school-based teams may need to perform additional survey level assessments as well as error analysis of subtests to appropriately place a student in an intervention. **Districts will be able to determine the areas that challenge students by administering appropriate, targeted assessments and carefully analyzing the data.** For example, a student’s URS may indicate a deficit in decoding, but without additional information, the school-based team would not know where in a phonics program to place the student. Similarly, phonemic awareness skills range from simple to complex. Teams need to understand strengths and weaknesses to ensure appropriate, targeted interventions and instruction. All interventions should be designed to provide access to Tier 1 classroom instruction.

District RTI² data teams should continue developing and expanding their practices in the analysis of student data and the alignment of targeted intervention supports and acceleration strategies for all students. See the department’s [RTI² Manual](#) for specific and current guidance on best practices and requirements for districts in the implementation of RTI² frameworks.

Districts can reference the included flowchart to guide decision making regarding further assessments and intervention support (see Appendix C).

Student Intervention Plans (SIPs)

When student data supports the provision of skills-based intervention within Tier II or Tier III, LEAs should document student placement and progress monitoring. This is most commonly done through student intervention plans. While there is no defined template for student intervention plans, SIPs should include

- An overview of student data
- Tiered intervention support level

- Identification of target skills to be addressed
- Intervention to be delivered (methodology or program)
- Qualitative and quantitative progress monitoring information
 - Methods
 - Frequency
- Plans for revisiting and revising student support, as needed

Student intervention plans, in other words, should hold space for the problem-solving approach to data-based decision making (see graphic on page 10).

Individualized Learning Plans for Characteristics of Dyslexia (ILP-Ds)

Individualized Learning Plans for characteristics of dyslexia (ILP-Ds) are specifically templated student interventions plans outlined under the Rules implementing Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA). See [Chapter 0520-01-22 of the Rules of the State Board of Education](#). Students for whom the school-based decision-making team determines a dyslexia-specific intervention is needed through RTI² may meet the criteria for an ILP-D.

The criteria for an ILP-D are strictly defined. School-based teams should utilize multiple sources of data to determine if a student requires a dyslexia-specific intervention based on their reading profile. In other words, school teams do not have to write an ILP-D for every student who meets criteria; the team should determine if the plan is appropriate and dyslexia-specific interventions are warranted. The team should utilize all gathered data to inform decisions regarding the student's reading profile and intervention needs.

Eligibility for an ILP-D should not pre-determine intervention placement, nor should the process of writing an ILP-D delay the provision of necessary intervention supports. Neither TISA nor ILP-D criteria replaces or supersedes the dyslexia screening requirements outlined within Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229.

LEAs should reference the [TISA Guide](#), the URS Decision-Making Crosswalks, and the ILP-D Oversight Template for detailed information on ILP-Ds.

Summary

Students who require skills-based tiered intervention as determined by a problem-solving team based on a variety of data should have their intervention placement and progress documented in some form of a student intervention plan. School-based teams should use all available data to determine how a student's needs are best met within the RTI² framework.

Tier I Access Considerations

Instructional scaffolds are temporary, student-specific support structures designed to maximize access to grade-level concepts and tasks.

Students with characteristics of dyslexia who struggle with foundational literacy skills may require additional considerations, scaffolds, and supports within the classroom to access grade-level content and fully engage with high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). HQIMs embed access points within instructional lessons to ensure all learners can engage with them. These might be checks for understanding, purposeful questioning, or another engagement opportunity. For some students, access points are not enough, and they may require additional support to be able to engage and/or complete an assignment or task. Instructional scaffolds are

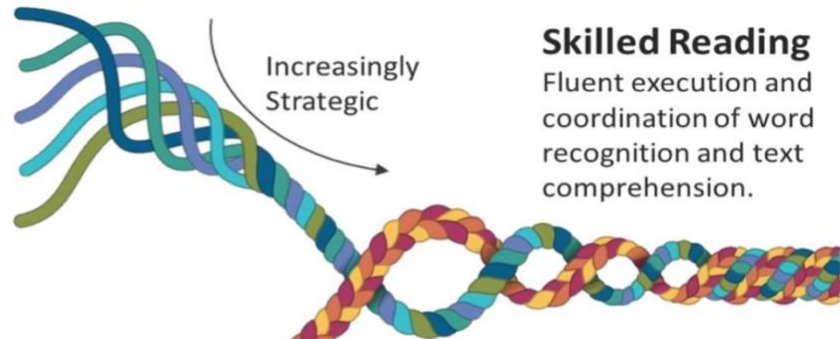
temporary, student-specific support structures designed to maximize access to grade-level concepts and tasks. Accommodations are similar to instructional scaffolds. However, instructional scaffolds should occur first, and then for students who are still struggling, additional accommodations may need to be considered. Instructional scaffolds relate more directly to the content of the lesson, while an accommodation addresses how content is presented. For example, a student may need the instructional scaffold of pre-teaching difficult vocabulary but also may need the accommodation of text-to-speech (oral/audio presentation) to access the material. **Accommodations do not and should not lower the educational standard or expectation for mastery or proficiency.** Accommodations are designed to support access, not guarantee proficiency.

For students who do not have an IEP or a Section 504 plan, LEAs should explore how ensuring access to grade-level content allows a student to engage with grade-level materials. Adjustments to how material is presented to ensure that students can access the content of the standard supports all students but may be necessary for students with characteristics of dyslexia. Students with characteristics of dyslexia struggle with the processes that support word identification. Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001) is a well-known graphic that illustrates the skills that support proficient reading. Students with characteristics of dyslexia primarily struggle with the bottom strand of Scarborough's rope, but due to these deficits, secondary gaps in the upper strand can develop.

Instructional scaffolds, access considerations, and accommodations provided to students with characteristics of dyslexia should support access to content that continues growth in the language comprehension domain of reading development while the student closes foundational skill gaps through skills-based instruction and intervention.

Language Comprehension

- Background Knowledge
- Vocabulary Knowledge
- Language Structures
- Verbal Reasoning
- Literacy Knowledge



Word Recognition

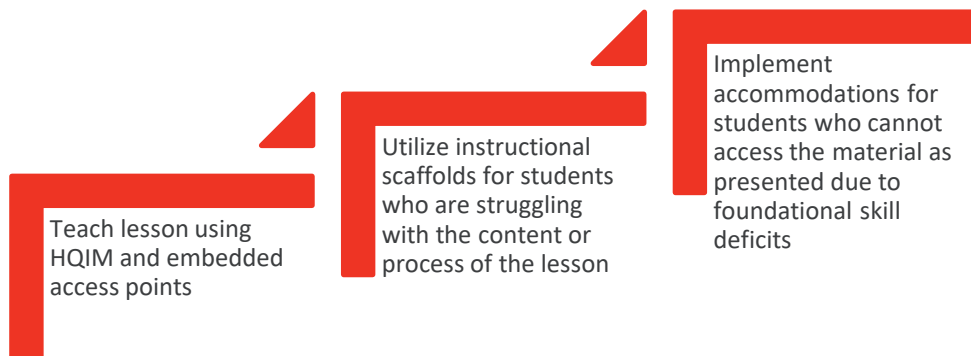
- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding (and Spelling)
- Sight Recognition



When selecting supports, HQIM access points provide a starting point for providing scaffolded instruction for a variety of learners. LEAs should work with student data and patterns of performance in the classroom to make decisions about what levels of support a student requires to access Tier I content. Some students with characteristics of dyslexia may require accommodations to how the content is presented. If at any time a school-based team or stakeholder suspects a child may have a disability requiring more support, a referral to special education must be made. See the Special Education (IDEA) and Section 504 section later in this guide for more information about referrals.

Some common Tier I instructional supports and accommodations that benefit students with characteristics of dyslexia are outlined in Appendix D.

Instructional Scaffolds and Accommodations within Tier I Instruction



Summary

High-quality instruction materials (HQIM) are designed to include access points and opportunities for teachers to embed necessary instructional scaffolds. Tier I instruction and the use of HQIM is designed to ensure ALL students maintain access to grade-level standards-based instruction through their district HQIM. The combination of high-quality Tier I instruction, targeted dyslexia-specific intervention, and appropriate classroom-level support helps ensure that students with characteristics of dyslexia are accessing grade-level content and meeting standards while closing their learning gaps in foundational skills. Access to grade-level content and high expectations are crucial to continued student growth. School-based teams should use a variety of data to determine what supports a student may require in Tier I to grow toward proficiency in grade-level standards.

Family Support

A child's educational team is not complete without family engagement. Districts have certain requirements for communication of characteristics of dyslexia, tiered support, resources, and progress monitoring. *See* Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-229(c). It is best practice to involve families as much as possible and to utilize family-friendly language and various modes of communication to ensure understanding and to provide opportunities for input and collaboration. The department continues to develop resources to support districts and families in open communication and the understanding of processes regarding characteristics of dyslexia and dyslexia.

Special Education (IDEA) and Section 504

While the majority of students with deficits in foundational reading skills can be served through general education classroom support and targeted intervention within the RTI² tiers, some students exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia may have a specific learning disability in basic reading and/or reading fluency. These students may continue to struggle despite appropriate classroom supports and targeted, intense interventions. Students whose indicators of dyslexia persist beyond that of peers despite adequate instruction and/or explicit intervention may have dyslexia.

Students with a specific learning disability in basic reading and/or reading fluency may qualify for an individualized education plan (IEP) through special education under IDEA or for a Section 504 plan. Eligibility for protections under IDEA or Section 504 involves identified need and referral, evaluation, and eligibility processes. Details on how students with dyslexia qualify for and are served through special education or Section 504 follow.

Special Education and Dyslexia

The term ***Specific Learning Disability*** means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, and that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Such term includes conditions such as perceptual disabilities (e.g., visual processing), brain injury that is not caused by an external physical force, minimal brain dysfunction, **dyslexia**, and developmental aphasia. Specific Learning Disability does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of Visual Impairment; Hearing Impairment; Orthopedic Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disturbance; Limited English Proficiency; or Environmental or Cultural Disadvantage. See Sec. 300.8(c)(10) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Literacy deficits should be addressed through the least restrictive environment for individual students within a continuum of alternative placements. Schools, in collaboration with parents and families, should consider all available information to develop a plan to address the individual needs of each student. This continuum of support may include tiered interventions through RTI², accommodations provided through Section 504 plans or IEPs, and/or special education interventions. If a student is suspected of having a disability at any time, a referral for special education must be made. Participation in tiered intervention is not a prerequisite requirement for a referral to special education; **a comprehensive evaluation for eligibility under IDEA and participation in RTI² tiered intervention for data collection can happen concurrently.**

States must adopt criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability. See 34 C.F.R. § 300.307(a). In Tennessee, before determining that a student is eligible for special education and related services under the specific learning disability category, students with dyslexia must meet state eligibility criteria prior to receiving special education services through an IEP—an outside diagnosis of dyslexia alone is not sufficient for a student to receive special education. Dyslexia is typically associated with a specific learning disability in basic reading, which includes foundational skills related to decoding (i.e., phonemic awareness, letter/sound knowledge, sight word recognition, phonics, and word analysis). A specific learning disability in reading fluency is also an identifying eligibility category of students with dyslexia, as inaccurate and/or dysfluent word reading is a primary indicator of dyslexia.

Pursuant to 34 C.F.R. § 300.301(b), a parent or the LEA may refer a child for an evaluation at any time to determine if the child is a child with a disability. If a student is suspected of having an educational disability at any time, the student may be referred by the student's teacher, parent, or outside sources for an initial special education evaluation based on referral concerns. The use of RTI² strategies may not be used to delay or deny the provision of a full and individual evaluation to a child suspected of having a disability. For more information on the rights to an initial evaluation, refer to [Memorandum 11-07](#) from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services.

A dyslexia evaluation is not required for a school to provide interventions to address characteristics of dyslexia; however, if a parent chooses to seek an evaluation (outside of the school system) for dyslexia and

shares the results with the school district of the evaluation obtained at private expense, the school district must consider the results of the evaluation in any decision made with respect to the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

It is not required that the school team identify dyslexia in order to meet criteria for a specific learning disability; however, the team should consider referral concerns and determine the most appropriate assessment plan to identify student deficits and develop a plan based on a continuum of services in the least restrictive environment. **There is nothing in IDEA that prevents the usage of the term “dyslexia” in discussion about the child.** See [United States Department of Education OSERS “Dear Colleague: Dyslexia Guidance.”](#) Since the state of Tennessee recognizes dyslexia under the umbrella of specific learning disability (SLD), in formal evaluation, eligibility determinations, and/or IEP documents (e.g., within basic reading present levels of performance, adverse impact statements, etc.), the student’s disability may be referred to as SLD in basic reading and/or fluency.

For more information regarding characteristics of dyslexia that teams may choose to assess as part of an evaluation, refer to <https://dyslexiaida.org/testing-and-evaluation/>.

Special education interventions are considered the most intensive and are provided based on a student’s eligibility and the need for specialized instruction. The student will remain in the core instruction (Tier I) and will have access to tiered intervention within the general education curriculum to the greatest extent possible. The same problem-solving approach used in the general education RTI² process will be used in special education. Furthermore, interventions will be tailored to the student in the area of the identified disability (i.e., dyslexia-specific interventions when appropriate), and progress toward their IEP goals will be monitored weekly or every other week. If students fail to respond to the provision of special education services, an IEP team meeting will be reconvened.

Section 504 and Dyslexia

Section 504 plans for dyslexia also require an evaluation and eligibility process. As mentioned previously, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) is a broad civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) also prohibits discrimination based on disability in public entities. Section 504 guarantees that a child with a disability has access to an education comparable to the education provided to a nondisabled child. For some children, this may require the development of a 504 plan.

Under Section 504, a student with a disability may have a plan that guarantees equal access to education and allows for certain accommodations or modifications. A student may be eligible for a Section 504 plan if the student has a “physical or mental impairment” that “substantially limits one or more major life activities.” See Section 504 regulations at 34 C.F.R. 104.3(j)(1)(i). To receive a Section 504 plan, students must also be referred by a school-based team or parent and meet certain criteria for eligibility. When a student has a 504

plan for dyslexia, the 504 plan typically provides classroom-based and testing accommodations designed to support the access of grade-level content and standards.

Like IDEA, Section 504 requires a district to identify and locate every eligible student with a disability and provide FAPE to each eligible student within its jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the student's disability. To ensure compliance with Section 504, a district should timely refer and evaluate a student with dyslexia who needs or is believed to need special education or related services. Evaluations of students with dyslexia must include a variety of sources of information, be tailored to evaluate the specific areas of educational need and be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used and appropriately administered by trained personnel.

An external diagnosis of dyslexia is not required before consideration of eligibility for a 504. Eligibility for a section 504 plan is based on an evaluation (see the office of civil rights [document](#) and the [department section 504 guide](#) for further information regarding 504 evaluations) and the determination that a student's mental or physical impairment substantially limits one or more major life activity (including reading). A school evaluation can address the profile of dyslexia, and results may be sufficient to determine a possible impairment. The profile of dyslexia is considered a type of specific learning disability. Should the team consider a referral to special education, the student would need to meet the educational criteria for a specific learning disability as outlined by the Tennessee evaluation standards. More information on dyslexia and Section 504 plans can be found detailed in "[Dyslexia and Section 504: Eligibility and Evaluation.](#)"

School teams should work with parents and families to consider all available information when developing plans to address the individual student's needs.

Summary

General education instruction and instructional scaffolds, for some students, may not provide all the support needed to be successful. Some students may need the support that special education or Section 504 provides. Both avenues involve an evaluation and eligibility process. Identification as a student with characteristics of dyslexia nor participation in RTI² can be used to deny or delay a referral for an evaluation if a student is suspected of having a disability.

Students with characteristics of dyslexia whose learning difficulties persist compared to peers despite adequate instruction and/or explicit, skills-based intervention may have dyslexia. If a stakeholder suspects a disability at any time, a referral to special education must be made.

References

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Appendix A

Taken and adapted from *Dyslexia Resource Guide* (2018 update). Information sources from IDA (2002) and IDA (2020). New content adapted from Alexander et al. (2023). See [Understanding Dyslexia: A Guide for Tennessee Families](#) for a more myths and truths.

Topic	Myth	Truth
Reversals	Dyslexia is a vision problem. Students with dyslexia see and write letters and words backwards.	Many children reverse their letters when learning to read and write. Reversing letters is not a sure sign of dyslexia, and not all students with dyslexia reverse letters.
School Success	If you perform well in school, you must not have dyslexia.	Students with dyslexia can perform well in school. These students work hard, are motivated, and have the accommodations necessary to show their knowledge.
Intelligence	Smart students cannot be dyslexic; students with dyslexia cannot be very smart.	Dyslexia is defined by an unexpected difficulty in learning to read. Said another way, dyslexia is a paradox—the same person who struggles to read quickly often has a very high intelligence.
Reading Ability	Students with dyslexia cannot learn to read.	Most students with dyslexia do learn to read, but with greater effort. They tend to remain “manual” rather than “fluent” readers, reading slowly and with great effort.
Reading Difficulties	All reading difficulties can be attributed to dyslexia.	The hallmark of dyslexia is an unexpected reading difficulty in a child who seems to have all the equipment (intelligence, verbal skills, motivation) necessary to become a reader. There are other ways students can struggle to read: (1) 3-10 percent of students who are strong decoders do not understand what they are reading (specific reading comprehension deficit) ¹ , and (2) some students struggle with both the code

		of the language and the meaning of the language (mixed reading deficit).
Eligibility	If a student has dyslexia, they will have an IEP. An IEP is the only way to get the appropriate instruction and accommodations needed.	Dyslexia ranges in many degrees from mild to severe (IDA, 2020). Some children with dyslexic characteristics meet the Standards of the State Board of Education for Evaluation and Eligibility for Specific Learning Disability and some do not. All students receive appropriate, differentiated instruction and universal accommodations in Tier I, and when needed, the student may receive Tier II or Tier III intervention. Students who do not respond to these interventions may be eligible to receive interventions through special education.
Identification	Schools cannot identify dyslexia.	Schools do not specifically evaluate whether students have dyslexia, but students with dyslexia may generally be eligible for special education and related services for having a specific learning disability or eligible for dyslexia-specific interventions within RTI ² for displaying characteristics of dyslexia. Nothing prevents LEAs from using the term “dyslexia” in discussing a child’s learning profile.
Gender	Only boys are affected by dyslexia.	Students of both genders can have dyslexia. The higher number of male referrals may be due to differences in classroom behaviors.
Short-term Problem	Most students will eventually outgrow dyslexia.	Dyslexia is the result of a processing difference in the brain and will last a lifetime.
Comprehension	Students who have dyslexia have poor reading comprehension skills.	Students with dyslexia tend to have strong comprehension skills, but this can be masked by (1) the amount of mental effort

		<p>required to decode, limiting access to the ability to think critically, and (2) a limited amount of reading, leading to a gap in the student's vocabulary as compared to students who read large amounts of appropriate text.</p>
<p>Developmental Milestones</p>	<p>Giving children more time will "fix" reading deficits and address their struggles with literacy.</p>	<p>Early identification and intervention are key! Students identified with a specific learning disability in reading or with characteristics of dyslexia are unlikely to catch up to peers without early, targeted intervention and high-quality instruction rooted in the science of reading.</p>

Appendix B

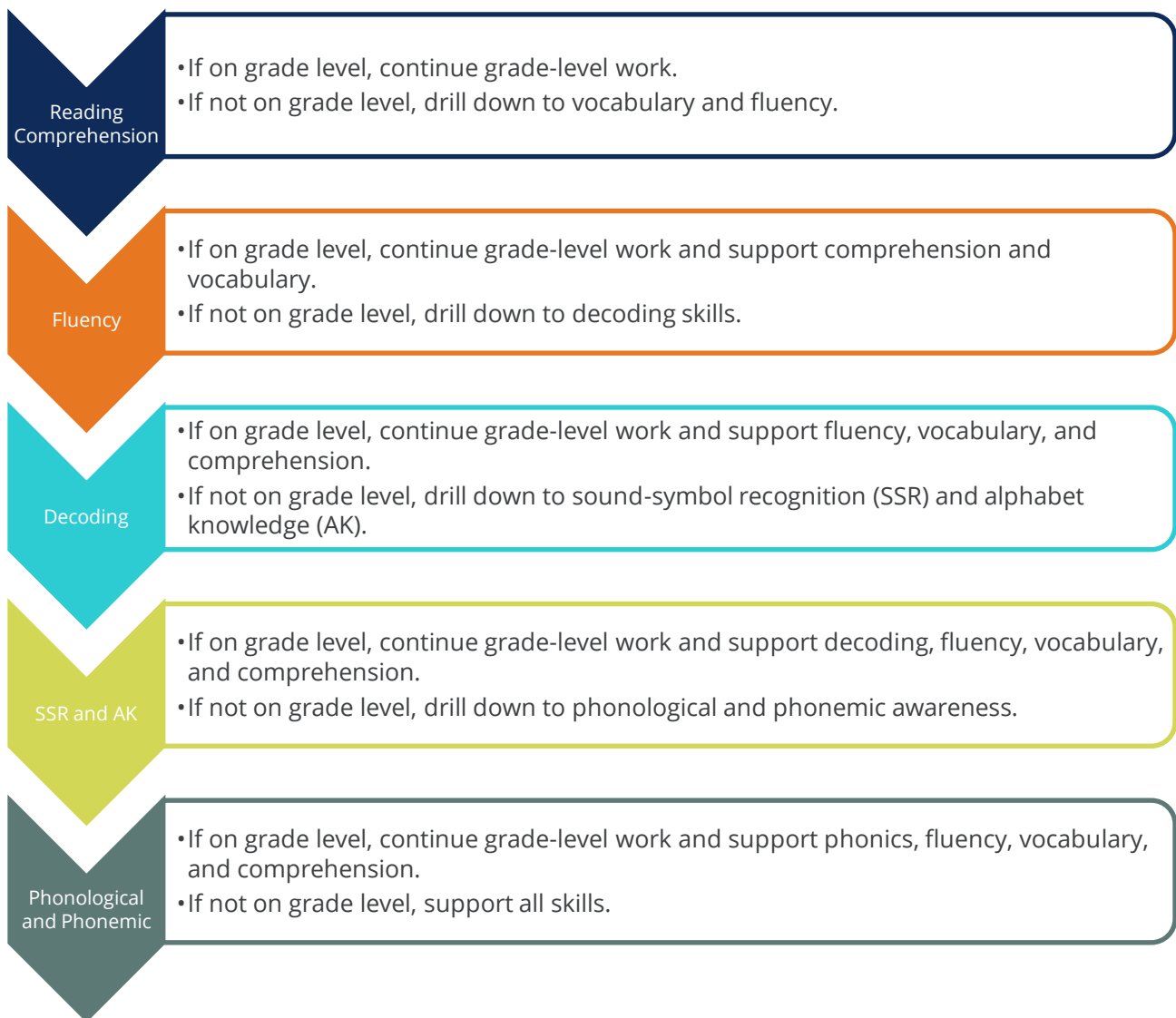
Common Signs of Dyslexia Across Grades and Development. Adapted from [Alexander et al. \(2023\)](#). See [Understanding Dyslexia: A Guide for Tennessee Families](#) for a more complete list.

Age Group	Difficulties
Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays in language development or errors in speech sound production • Mispronunciation of words • Difficulties with phonological skills like rhyming or syllable identification/segmentation (word play) • Challenges in letter naming/identification
Primary and Elementary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with sound symbol correspondence (matching sound to letter) • Persistent or ongoing confusion of similar looking and/or similar sounding letters • Difficulties with phonemic skill tasks, such as isolating beginning, medial, or final sounds, as well as segmenting the individual sounds in words • Reading and spelling errors such as reversals, substitutions, omissions, additions, transpositions, and the addition or omission of suffixes • Difficulty with directions, especially multi-step • Frequent errors when reading high frequency words
Middle School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow or laborious oral reading fluency • Significant difficulties reading and spelling longer words • Lack of awareness in relation to word structure (morphology) • Difficulties in written expression due to root issues in spelling and organization • Challenges with reading comprehension due to word reading deficits
High School and Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent difficulty with word reading that affects comprehension • Slower reading fluency • Spelling and written composition challenges

No child’s development is the same. It is possible that children may reach developmental milestones at different points of the expected range. Reversals and errors are normal parts of learning to read. Persistent and ongoing difficulties in light of high-quality instruction and/or intervention, however, are suggestive of more significant reading struggles. Children with dyslexia continue to struggle after their typically developing peers have stopped.

Appendix C

The following graphic outlines suggestions for drilling down to determine student need based on screener and skill area data. The suggestions of focus relate to intervention instruction but should also be areas to consider when selecting appropriate classroom-level support. For example, a student who is struggling with decoding would likely need both intervention with a phonics focus but also perhaps accessibility support, such as oral/audio presentation or assistive technology. Additional areas worth assessing are encoding and rapid automatized naming, depending on student profile. In grades K-2, if a student is not on grade level in comprehension, the team should drill down to decoding, since reading comprehension performance at those grade levels generally relates to decoding skill. Please also note that reading comprehension is different than oral language or listening comprehension. Students with characteristics of dyslexia and foundational literacy deficits **may** have average or even advanced oral language skills, while others may not.



Appendix D

Guidance on Selecting and Using Classroom Support and Accommodations

Support or Accommodation	Definition(s)	Guidance for Use
<p>Oral/Audio presentation of anchor texts</p>	<p>Oral presentation of text; text to speech (this can be done through assistive technology as well)</p>	<p>Students who are reading below grade-level still need access to complex language and unaltered texts central to the purpose of the lesson and standard(s) being taught in Tier I instruction.</p>
<p>Opportunities for fluency practice with decodable (K-3) or appropriate (4-12) texts</p>	<p>Decodable texts are texts composed of predictably patterned words and other high frequency words that a student has already been taught. Appropriate texts, for older students, refer to texts within a student’s instructional reading level. Repeated readings and practice with decodable and appropriate texts for the development of fluency is backed by research. The more fluent a student is, the more cognitive resources can be dedicated to comprehension rather than decoding.</p>	<p>Decodable and appropriately targeted texts <i>should not</i> replace rigorous core texts. Instead, students should be given opportunities to practice with these texts during alternative times to help build fluency (accuracy, rate, and prosody) and confidence. Repeated readings with the same text paired with immediate corrective feedback is a research-based tool for improving student automaticity (fluency) and engagement with a passage.</p>
<p>Multiple formats of presentation (auditory, visual, etc.) and opportunity for multi-sensory</p>	<p>While research is not definitive on the effects of multi-sensory learning, there is evidence that the more engaged student senses are in learning, the more likely they are to transfer information from working and short-term memory to long-term</p>	<p>Multiple formats of presentation can benefit all learners. For struggling learners, it can be especially important to ensure enhanced repetitions and exposures on a concept for students who require extensive practice compared to peers. Having students</p>

<p>learning engagement</p>	<p>memory. Multi-sensory learning does not need to involve intricate gadgets or tools. Literacy instruction that engages multiple senses is as simple as having students hear, say, read, and write!</p>	<p>involve visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities within a lesson can enhance attention, engagement, and learning.</p>
<p>No penalty for spelling in writing tasks/opportunities to correct spelling of words with previously taught concepts</p>	<p>Penalties would equate to grade reductions or other punitive consequences.</p>	<p>Students cannot be expected to write words for which they do not have the tools to spell. Student corrections should include phonics patterns and high frequency words the student has been explicitly taught. Students may require visual models or other support in making corrections for both taught concepts and unfamiliar words. The goal of this is to reinforce correct spelling by having the student rewrite the word correctly, not in producing frustration by prolonging additional academic struggle.</p>
<p>Chunking of text and/or task</p>	<p>Chunking refers to breaking longer pieces of text (or a longer task) into more manageable-sized pieces. Chunking can ease the stress of longer passages for struggling readers and provide more opportunities to check for understanding.</p>	<p>Chunking is a scaffold that can support all learners whether during a repeated close reading or a first pass at a text. Struggling readers with characteristics of dyslexia can get fatigued by text easily when reading independently. Breaking the text into smaller chunks can make longer text appear less overwhelming. More frequent checks for understanding inherent in chunked text help to ensure content is not being lost across an entire passage before other scaffolds can be provided.</p>

<p>Pre-teaching of vocabulary and/or background knowledge</p>	<p>Unfamiliar vocabulary or subject matter can produce an additional roadblock for struggling decoders.</p>	<p>Pre-teaching vocabulary does not need to be time-consuming; it can be as simple as seeing the word, saying the word, and using the word in a few contexts. For background knowledge, visuals, videos, companion texts, and discussion are all ways to engage students in an unfamiliar subject before reading the text. This can support all learners, but background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge have been shown to enhance independent comprehension of text even for less skilled decoders.</p>
<p>Other</p>	<p>Other allows teams to indicate other support or accommodations appropriate and necessary for the child to access grade-level Tier I instruction.</p>	<p>Be thoughtful when choosing custom support and accommodation and keep grade-level expectations in mind.</p>

Note that not all accommodations and supports may be available to students during standardized assessments. Students with an IEP, a Section 504 plan, or an Individualized Learning Plan for English Learner status may have allowable accommodations in both the classroom and on assessments if the team determines necessary and appropriate. Teachers and parents should reference student plans if they have questions about testing accommodations.

Acronyms

This appendix houses common acronyms related to RTI², special education, dyslexia, characteristics of dyslexia, and TISA. Not all of these acronyms appear in the body of this guide but are related terms families and districts may need to understand.

Acronym	Meaning
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
AT	Assistive technology
AYP	Adequate yearly progress
CoD	Characteristics of dyslexia
FAPE	Free appropriate public education
FERPA	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
HQIM	High-quality instructional material
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEE	Independent Educational Evaluation
IEP	Individualized education program
ILP	Individual learning plan (for English learners)
ILP-D	Individual learning plan for characteristics of dyslexia

LEA	Local education agency (school district)
LRE	Least restrictive environment
PLEP or PLOP	Present levels of (educational) performance
PWN	Prior written notice
ROI	Rate of improvement
RTI²	Response to instruction and intervention
SEA	State education agency
SLD	Specific learning disability
SPED	Special education
The department	Tennessee Department of Education
TN PULSE	Tennessee Planning for Unique Learning Success and Excellence

Reading 360

The Tennessee Department of Education's [Reading 360](#) initiative, including teacher training, family engagement, and commitment to high-quality instructional materials and the science of reading is driving results.

Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia

The Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia is a research and testing facility with a variety of invaluable resources. The center actively conducts research and supports the translation of research to practice.

View [Understanding Dyslexia: A Guide for Families](#).

Visit their [main webpage](#), with special attention to the Educator and Parent Resources tab.

Acknowledgements

Characteristics of Dyslexia Working Group

A group of exceptional educators met on a weekly or bi-weekly basis beginning in October 2022 to provide feedback and input on the resources and materials surrounding characteristics of dyslexia guidance. Thank you to its members.

Working Group Member	District/Organization	Position
Jen Aprea	The Arc Tennessee	Director of Family Engagement in Special Education
Alisha Bauman	Gibson County Special School District	RTI Coordinator
Kathy Daugherty	Murfreesboro City Schools	Reading and RTI Coordinator
Lenora Douglas	Newport City Schools	RTI Coordinator
Dr. Allison Gardenhour	Johnson City Schools	RTI Coach
Beth C. Glover	Milan County Schools	READ Interventionist/Dyslexia Screener
Tammy Lewis	Marshall County Schools	Supervisor of Elementary Education
Emily Underwood	Bartlett City Schools	RTI Coach

Dyslexia Advisory Council

The [Dyslexia Advisory Council](#) has been instrumental in continued reform of identification, service, and advocacy for students with characteristics of dyslexia and dyslexia. Thank you to its members.