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STRUGGLING READERS

NEA Research Brief

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STRUGGLING READERS

INTRODUCTION

Success in reading is essential throughout a student's school career and into adulthood. Numerous reports have shown that the consequences of leaving school without basic reading skills are profound at the individual student level and



for society as a whole. Children who fail to read by the third grade have lower levels of achievement, are more likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to engage with the criminal justice system.^{1 2 3} Failure to read not only diminishes attainment at the



individual level, but also affects the economic growth and well-being of the nation. Adults with low literacy levels have higher levels of unemployment, a reduced earning potential, and lower chances for success. Consequently, they contribute less to the economy, and if unemployed, increase the unemployment expenditures of state and local governments. Thus, tackling reading difficulties early in children's school career has undeniable long-term benefits for individuals as well as society.^{4 5}

NEA supports evidenced-based instruction and ongoing professional development in the teaching of reading to struggling readers, including those with dyslexia. Of particular interest to the NEA is supporting reading improvements during the early childhood years when interventions can be most impactful.

An indicator of the proportion of children who are at risk of reading difficulty are results of the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment. At the national level, 33 percent of students in grade four scored **below the basic** achievement level.⁶ When results are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the percentage of students scoring below basic is much higher. For example, the percentage of black children scoring below basic is 49 percent, Latinos, 46 percent, students living in poverty, 46 percent, and for students with disabilities, 68 percent. By contrast, the

proportions of white and Asian fourth-graders scoring below basic are 22 percent and 16 percent respectively.

The score gaps between high- and low-poverty students and between white and Asian-American students and students in other racial/ethnic groups have narrowed somewhat since 1992, but continue to persist.

READING AND RISK FACTORS

Young children at risk of reading difficulty encounter impediments in understanding and using foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The underlying cause placing children at risk of reading difficulty can be biological or environmental.^{7 8} For example, dyslexia is a specific language disability associated with reading difficulty. Dyslexia affects reading, specifically decoding and accurate and/or fluent word recognition and spelling. Consequently, children with dyslexia have difficulty with reading comprehension, aspects of written language, and limited vocabulary due to a reduced reading experience.

Environmental risk factors are many, but poverty is most significant.⁹ Children from low-income households (as a group) enter kindergarten and first grade behind more affluent peers in terms of background knowledge and cognitive and social skills. In a study of vocabulary development among children from different

socio-economic groups, researchers found that by age 3, children from professional families had experienced (heard) approximately 11.2 million words; a child in a working-class family had heard 6.5 million words; and a child with parents on public assistance had heard 3.2 million words.¹⁰ Therefore, children from working-class and high-poverty backgrounds are comparatively disadvantaged by the time they enter kindergarten. Those children who are both poor and members of an ethnic/racial group are at greater risk of reading difficulty because of the convergence of poverty with race/ethnicity, which is a strong predictor of reading difficulties.¹¹

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN AT RISK OF READING DIFFICULTIES

In the past, schools implemented a variety of strategies to identify children at risk of reading difficulties prior to referral for special education evaluation. However, these approaches were not research-based, and in some instances, young children were not identified or provided with appropriate intervention services.^{12 13} In addition, some children were incorrectly identified, and consequently given services that did not address their particular need. This is particularly the case with African American, Native American, and English language learners.¹⁴ In the case of ELLs, a contributing

factor is the inability of decision makers to determine whether an English learner student's academic difficulties are caused by a learning disability or by struggles with second-language acquisition or some other factor.¹⁵ Studies show that ELLs are under-identified at the national level and over-identified at the state and district levels.¹⁶ For African American males, disruptive behavior is the primary reason for referrals for special education evaluation. But, referral of African American boys is disproportionate to that of other children. When students are misplaced in a classroom or program, it has long-term



consequences for their achievement and behavioral outcomes.

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Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are partly a response to this challenge.¹⁹ MTSS is a school-wide approach that addresses the needs of all students, including struggling learners and students with disabilities. A key objective of a multi-tiered system of support is prevention of inappropriate placement, and responding early to students with reading difficulty by using research-based interventions.²⁰ There is evidence that MTSS is effective in improving early reading and math for all students, and in reducing the number of students misidentified.²¹

Universal screening is the first step of an early detection and prevention strategy designed to identify students at risk of reading difficulty before they fall behind.²² The purpose of screening is to differentiate students who require intervention from those who do not. To meet this objective, tools have been developed to assess proficiencies, such as letter name recognition, phonemic awareness, word reading, and fluency.

RESEARCH-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Interventions designed to address specific skill deficits in reading are likely to benefit struggling readers regardless of the basis of the reading difficulty.²³ Nonetheless, there



is variability in strength and weaknesses by individual characteristic, age and grade level. There are numerous published and online sources of information about effective practices and interventions in teaching reading to struggling readers. (See appendix A). A review of these resources reveals unanimity regarding effectiveness of the following practices for all students:²⁴

- ✓ **Differentiated reading** instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading levels (Tier 1).
- ✓ **Intensive, systematic** instruction on as many as three foundational reading skills in small groups to students who score below the benchmark on universal screening. Typically, these groups meet between three and five times a week for 20 to 40 minutes (Tier 2).

- ✓ **Intensive instruction on a** daily basis that promotes the development of the various components of reading proficiency to students who show minimal progress after reasonable time in Tier 2 small-group instruction (Tier 3).

In addition, when working with students who are potentially at risk, research findings show that:²⁵

- ✓ **There is no need to delay** reading instruction for many young children who are English learners because these beginning readers appear to make greater gains when they are taught how to read and to speak English at the same time.
- ✓ **Peer-assisted learning** interventions may be effective for improving reading outcomes, and many of the small group interventions

can be implemented effectively by paraeducators. Standard protocol instruction, where intensive interventions are provided to all of the students in a small group, are generally effective for many students.

- ✓ **Differentiated or individualized** instruction may be more effective in improving reading outcomes than high-quality instruction that is not differentiated.
- ✓ **The development of reading** in typically developing students may be applicable for students with intellectual disabilities and students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Reading curricula that are comprehensive and include phonics instruction in addition to sight-word instruction appear to be more effective than sight-word instruction alone.
- ✓ **Most students with intellectual disabilities** required instruction over an extended period of time (2-3 years) to reach basic levels of literacy. Building a foundation of phonemic awareness and print knowledge, and developing vocabulary and comprehension skills using story books and oral language development strategies, appears to be associated with stronger reading outcomes.
- ✓ **For students with intellectual disabilities**, explicit behaviorally based instructional strategies (e.g., time delay, simultaneous

prompting) that are consistently applied may support stronger reading skill gains.

Below are evidence-based professional development and effective approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with literacy-related difficulties, including dyslexia.

- ✓ **Kentucky Department of Education**
education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/teachtools/Documents/Dyslexia_Toolkit_2019.pdf
- ✓ **Reading Rockets**
www.readingrockets.org/article/phonics-instruction
- ✓ **Educational Resources**
www.voyagersopris.com/resources
- ✓ **Educational Strategies**
www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies
- ✓ **Education Tools for students with dyslexia:**
www.middleweb.com/39393/we-can-do-lots-more-for-students-with-dyslexia/

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the racial/ethnic and linguistic diversity of struggling readers, educators want to support inclusive practices in all phases of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The goal is to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are served appropriately,

and not wrongly referred (or placed) in special education.

There is no single, generally accepted definition of a culturally responsive screening process, nor a **single** screening tool that can validly assess both CLD students and English language learners (ELLs).^{26 27} Moreover, there is no consensus regarding the appropriateness of using the same screening and monitoring assessments tools with ELLs that are used with non-ELLs. Some researchers claim that, with appropriate considerations, the same screening and monitoring tools can be used with ELLs. Others disagree, noting that the tools were not initially designed for ELLs or culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Despite the limited research and questions surrounding the validity of screening procedures for CLD students, experts have developed the following set of recommendations for practitioners to consider when working with ELLs at risk of reading difficulties. The following table is a summary of the recommendations regarding screening and progress monitoring within a multi-tiered support system. Each of these recommendations have evidence of effectiveness and are extensively discussed in the sources cited.^{28 29} In addition, prior to screening, background factors are studied to inform planning and supplement results of initial screening.

TABLE 1.**CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNIVERSAL SCREENING**

- Ideally, use screening tools with demonstrated reliability and validity, and assess in both first (L1) and second language (L2);
- Use multiple measures to assess reading acquisition (oral development, teacher observations, writing sample as appropriate, information from family);
- Consider the proficiency in the target areas (reading skill) in both languages. Students highly proficient in early reading skills in first language and low in the second language are instructionally different from students low in proficiency in both languages.
- Plan instruction based on the student's performance and literacy experiences in both languages (L1 and L2).
- Provide instructional support to ELLs with low performance in reading areas even when oral language skills in English are low. The goal is to address development of language and literacy skills in English simultaneously.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRESS MONITORING

- Monitor ELLs' progress in all languages of instruction—a minimum of three times per year for students at grade level or above and three to six times per year for students at risk for reading problems.
- Evaluate growth of true peers to determine whether instruction is generally effective for students with similar linguistic and educational experiences.
- Consider students' accents and pronunciations when scoring English measures and provide appropriate interpretations when words are mispronounced. Students should not be penalized for use of dialect features.
- Consider multiple variables while explaining ELLs' lack of progress.
- Set rigorous goals that support students to meet grade-level standards.
- Use curriculum-based measurement to determine risk and monitor progress across tiers with ELLs as part of a school-wide MTSS model.
- Consider that students may be acquiring word meaning while acquiring word reading and, thus, oral reading fluency may proceed at an expected rate early (while students are focusing on word reading) and then proceed at a lower than expected rate later when students are focusing more on word meaning.

INTERVENTIONS

In general, research-based practices for young students learning to read apply to CLD/ELL students. However, experts recommend modifications in instructional strategies and delivery approach. Children bring to the schools social, cultural, and linguistic attributes that bear on the teaching and learning process. If these attributes are used in instruction, they can facilitate learning.³⁰ A review of the research on regarding supports for CLD/ELLs within a MTSS context identifies the following evidenced-based practices:

TIER I – Interventions should:

- ➔ Build background knowledge using strategies appropriate for instructing ELLs; e.g., Total Physical Response (TPR, including visuals, realia (real objects), modeling, repetitive language, and gestures).
- ➔ Include language activities and explicit instruction in phonological awareness, the alphabet code, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies. Utilize Sheltered Instruction strategies.
- ➔ Provide students the opportunity to develop oral language in English; this should be part of the core instruction for ELLs.
- ➔ Provide instruction and/or instructional support in the primary language.

TIER II – Interventions should:

- ➔ Use systematic and explicit instruction with modeling, multiple examples and feedback.
- ➔ Use academic language and vocabulary instruction with multiple opportunities to practice.
- ➔ Provide frequent structured opportunities to develop oral language.
- ➔ Focus on specific reading and math skills as determined by assessment data.
- ➔ Teach vocabulary across content areas.
- ➔ Teach high-utility academic words and teach word learning strategies.
- ➔ Offer reading, writing, listening, and speaking in authentic contexts (e.g., reading books, writing for authentic purposes, and role play to develop oral language).
- ➔ Provide reinforcement, repetition, practice and redundancy of vocabulary, skills, and strategies taught in core reading.
- ➔ Use sheltered instruction to support students' content learning.
- ➔ Use peer-supported instruction/peer-assisted learning strategies.
- ➔ Teach explicit comprehension strategies.
- ➔ Provide instruction and/or instructional support in the primary language.

TIER III – Interventions should:

- ➔ Include the option of receiving modified curriculum from Tiers I and II:
- ➔ Be based on curriculum and instruction that address specific learning needs.
- ➔ Teach explicit comprehension strategies.
- ➔ Carefully and frequently monitor progress.
- ➔ Provide instruction and/or instructional support in the primary language.
- ➔ Teach high-utility academic words and teach word learning strategies.

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SUMMARY

Success in reading is essential throughout a student's school career and into adulthood. Recent data from the NAEP reading assessment shows that approximately one-third of all fourth-grade students are not meeting basic reading standards. When results are broken out by racial and student subgroups, the percentage of African-American and Hispanic children and children with disabilities or living in poverty scoring below basic is higher than other subgroups for a variety of reasons. This

presents greater challenges for practitioners at all levels of the educational system. Children scoring below expectations may be at risk of reading difficulty, and regardless of the basis for the difficulties, schools need to provide supports early in a student's career.

Interventions designed for students at risk of reading difficulty are helpful to all students. However, modifications in identification, diagnosis, and delivery of services are needed when working with culturally

and linguistically diverse students at risk of reading difficulty. Although there is a need to expand research and practitioners' understandings, multiple sources of support and resources can be drawn on to assist struggling readers. Research-based guidance is available to states and localities from a number of sources, including research centers, advocacy organizations, and various agencies of the federal government. These are listed in Appendix A.

APPENDIX A

SELECTED LINKS TO RESOURCES

Center on Instruction

Resources of the Center target in particular students in the lowest-performing schools, students with difficulties learning mathematics, students needing intensive instruction, or special needs/diverse learners, including English language learners. www.centeroninstruction.org

California MAP to Inclusion and Belonging

Cultural Competency & Resources in Multiple Languages
cainclusion.org/camap/resources-and-links/cultural-competency-resources-in-multiple-languages/#national-center-for-culturally-responsive-educational-systems

Center on Response to Intervention: Screening Resources

RTI and English Language Learners. Discussion of stages in English language development process, case studies, background experiences of ELLs, and screening recommendations (decision path).
rti4success.org/sites/default/files/rtiforells.pdf

National Center on Intensive Intervention

A chart containing a list of academic screening tools with descriptive information about technical standards and usability features.
charts.intensiveintervention.org/chart/academic-screening

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017).

Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
doi.org/10.17226/24677.

Education Commission of the States (ECS). 50-State Comparison

State Kindergarten-Through-Grade Policies. Are Kindergarten entrance assessments required? June 2018. Document contains a list of states that require kindergarten assessments. In many cases there is not sufficient information to determine whether a given state screens for possible reading difficulty.
ecs.force.com/mbdata/BQest2RTanw?rep=KK3Q1811

A Problem Still in Search of a Solution: A State Policy Roadmap for Improving Early Reading Proficiency. This report provides a framework to help state leaders and policymakers create more effective policies that will improve reading performance.
www.ecs.org/a-problem-still-in-search-of-a-solution-a-state-policy-roadmap-for-improving-early-reading-proficiency/

Chart containing academic progress monitoring tools. Organized by subject, skill area, grade level, and other features.
charts.intensiveintervention.org/chart/progress-monitoring

National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). School Readiness Assessment Statutes.
www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/educ/NCSL_Readiness_Assessment_Statutes_2014_Update.pdf

National Center on Improving Literacy
improvingliteracy.org/resource-repository

National Institute for Early Education Research
nieer.org/

U.S. Department of Education Toolkit. Section focusing on English Language Learners with Disabilities (Ch. 6).
www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/

United States Department of Health and Human Services Screening Dual Language Learners in Early Head Start and Head Start: A Guide for Program Leaders
eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/screening-dual-language-learners.pdf

U.S. Office of Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness Gathering and Using Information That Families Share. To assist with collection of information and children's need for special education from the parents.
eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/gathering-using-language-info-families-share.pdf

United States Department of Education. (USDE) Institute for Education Science.
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