

**Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology**

Statement of:

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Topic: Teacher Professional Learning to Teach Students with Dyslexia

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Thank you Chairman Smith for your dedication to individuals with dyslexia and to all here working for the betterment of their lives.

I believe we are at a critical juncture in time. Many states have established dyslexia laws and others are following suit, but they need further guidance on how to prepare their teachers to effectively teach these students and how to implement the instruction with success. In addition to offering a consistent definition of and requirements for screening students for dyslexia, the key is for these laws to expect that teachers be prepared to effectively teach students with dyslexia how to read.

My work in this field began more than thirty years ago. As a new college graduate with a degree in special education, I was hired to test students who were referred for an educational evaluation. It was in a small town in Massachusetts, so I did this for grades K-12. I quickly realized that by far the most common reason for referral was the inability to read. Following the testing, I also conducted the team meeting with parents and teachers to determine an instructional plan. At the beginning, I enthusiastically shared what we would do to teach the child to read. Unfortunately, that soon changed as I did many three-year re-evaluations which demonstrated that what we were doing was not helping. In fact, after three years without progress, the students became even more desperately behind.

My search to help these students led me to Massachusetts General Hospital's Language Disorders Unit where I was given the opportunity to complete a year-long clinical training with individuals diagnosed with dyslexia using a methodology called Orton-Gillingham. This type of teaching is also referred to as Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) or Structured Literacy instruction.ⁱ I was excited to discover a way to teach these individuals how to read and write, but also discouraged to learn that this teaching knowledge was limited and only available in private schools costing parents, or school districts, \$20,000 per year or more at that time.

Rather than return to my evaluation position, I continued working part-time at Mass General with adults diagnosed with dyslexia, which I did for the next five years. Concurrently, I founded the Wilson Learning Center with my husband, Ed.

Students who had struggled for years in public school settings, despite IEPs and teachers' efforts to help, came to the Center to learn to read. It was during this time that I developed the Wilson Reading System[®]. Soon, I was invited to a meeting with the special education directors from ten nearby school districts who asked me to work with their staffs because parents were demanding the instruction that their children received at the Center.

Thus began our work, which has continued since 1988 – that is, providing both curricula and professional learning to teachers in public schools so that individuals with dyslexia can learn how to read, write, and become successful. My work with adults taught me that it was possible to teach individuals with dyslexia how to read, but if they don't learn to do that while still in school, too often their paths in life are filled with significant failure and distress (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008, Fletcher & Lyon, 1998, and Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In addition to the deeply personal impact, the societal impact is significant.ⁱⁱ

I wish I could tell you that the beginning of my story could not be repeated in 2015 because all teachers are now well prepared to teach students with dyslexia. Sadly, that is not true. The same scenario plays out over and over again across this country today: a student doesn't learn how to read, and the student is referred to special education where teachers are unprepared to provide effective reading instruction (Joshi et al., 2009, and Fletcher & Lyon, 1998).

However, it should not be this way. Research has identified the necessary instruction that individuals with dyslexia need (NICHD, 2000). We are also learning from neuroscience how

effective instruction affects the brain. In one study in which our program was used, implementation with qualified instructors led to improved brain function as well as rewiring of the brain to function similarly to the brain of a good reader (Keller & Just, 2009, and Meyler, Keller, Cherkassky, Gabrieli, & Just, 2008).

Teachers go into teaching with a real desire to teach children. But most teaching degree programs do not include the in-depth work needed for them to gain the practical skills to effectively teach individuals with dyslexia, and therefore they lack the knowledge needed for this formidable task (Joshi, 2009, Washburn, et al., 2011, and Moats & Foorman, 2003). School districts throughout the country have recognized this gap and contract with us to provide their teachers with the necessary training. At times, we are brought in as the result of a due-process hearing to prevent an outside placement in a private school. Often it is simply in the interest of helping their students succeed.

Today, we conduct training in schools across America. The extensive training we provide yields a certification. To date, Wilson has certified 25,000 teachers. To achieve this requires a commitment to study, in detail, the structure of the English language and how to break it down into its simplest components. Teachers learn this through an online course and a year-long clinical experience within a public school or other setting where they are provided expert supervision as they work with a student who has a significant reading disability.

Upon completion of the first level of certification, teachers become well-equipped to help students acquire reading skills during an intensive intervention. Although these teachers previously had earned their reading and special education degrees, they commonly express, “why didn’t I learn how to do this before?” To support this effort, Wilson is partnering with 6 universities that embed our certification into their degree program and offer 10 graduate credits upon successful completion of the certification work.

Teachers should be learning the in-depth knowledge and skills in their teacher preparation programs. Several years ago, The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) created a document to guide the requirements for teacher preparation called *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading*. I was one of the authors. Its intent is to promote teacher preparation programs to incorporate the key elements necessary for teachers to succeed with all

students, including those with dyslexia. Teacher preservice programs that align with these standards will go a long way toward improving the preparation of teachers.

I am here to tell you that individuals with dyslexia can absolutely learn to read and write if working with a knowledgeable teacher under the right conditions. I have witnessed thousands of students who were unable to read even basic words when they were past the elementary grades, later learn to read with a well-trained teacher, and go on to college and beyond—often with careers in engineering and science. Technology must play a role in scaling up effective instruction, but we must not lose sight of the tangible and intangible factors that a skilled, diagnostic, and determined teacher will bring to the equation. In an earlier testimony, you heard Landmark College describe its instructional approach. There, they use teachers certified in the Wilson Reading System to deliver effective instruction in combination with technology solutions.

I am a believer in technology aids such as audiobooks, but these accommodations should not replace instruction that will actually teach students how to read independently. First and foremost, there is a way to teach these students how to read, as has been discussed in previous testimony. Therefore, it is wrong to only provide accommodations that will still limit students' life experiences, such as giving them the confidence to travel independently beyond their known neighborhoods and truly believe in their own intelligence. Since they *can* learn to read and write, we must teach them.

Providing teachers with highly skilled training is a tremendous first step. However, successful results can only be realized if the school day and resources are structured in a manner that enables these highly skilled teachers to provide the needed instruction. All too often, even with highly skilled teachers on staff, the schedule of the school prevents teachers from providing this instruction. As we know, students cannot benefit from an intervention they never receive (NIRN, 2013; Duda & Wilson, 2015).

In a recent white paper I co-authored with Dr. Michelle Duda for Literate Nation (*Using Implementation Science to Close the Policy to Practice Gap*), we discuss the importance of policymakers attending to research from implementation science in order to increase the odds that policies will affect classroom or school practice in the expected way (Duda & Wilson, 2015). The point we share from implementation science is that selecting an effective intervention

is not sufficient. We must also utilize effective implementation methods and provide enabling contexts (Fixsen, Blasé, Duda, Naoom, & Van Dyke, 2010). This is what the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) refers to as the Formula for Success:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Effective} & & \text{Effective} & & \text{Enabling} & = & \text{Intended} \\ \text{Intervention} & \times & \text{Implementation} & \times & \text{Context} & & \text{Outcomes} \end{array}$$

(Fixsen, Blase, Duda, Naoom, & Van Dyke, 2010)

There is a major gap between what research says we should do for students with dyslexia and what is actually done in our schools, and using practices that align with the science of implementation can help bridge that gap.

As October is National Dyslexia Awareness Month, this hearing is timely. I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to share my experiences and draw attention to the need for increasing the preparation of teachers so that they can successfully teach individuals with dyslexia to read and write. Thank you.

Recommended Research Topics

- How do various student profiles respond to different curricula? Continue study to understand the link between the different profiles of students with dyslexia and the kind of curricula they need. This is essential to understand how best to help all students.
- What are the key elements of instruction for students beyond the elementary grades? Although early identification and treatment is ideal, it is “never too late.” However, we need to know what the critical elements of instruction are for these older students.
- What are effective teacher training models? Study the long-term outcomes of students who are taught with the different models.
- What are effective technology solutions? Determine which of these work with different student profiles, including different age brackets.
- What does it take to bridge the implementation gap? That is, how do we scale effective teaching models with a clear understanding of the implementation requirements.
- How do students with dyslexia fare in college and careers once they learn to read and write? Research the link between improvement in reading and writing skills for students with dyslexia and their subsequent college and career readiness.

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ⁱ Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) or Structured Literacy instruction is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic while incorporating visual, auditory, kinesthetic-tactile approaches to learning. The content of instruction is focused on the structure of the English language and includes: phonology and phonological awareness, sound-symbol associations, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax, and semantics. (International Dyslexia Association, n.d., and The International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council, n.d.)

ⁱⁱ Research has shown a strong connection between poor literacy skills and a high high-school dropout rate, which in turn leads to high incarceration rates, high unemployment rates, and a low income level. Sadly, for juveniles in the criminal justice system, estimates of learning disability are as high as 75-90% (Mentor & Wilkinson, 2005). How many of these have dyslexia? As you heard from Dr. Sally Shaywitz, Co-Director of the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, “Dyslexia is the most common...of the learning disabilities, affecting 80% to 90% of all individual identified as learning disabled.” (The Science of Dyslexia, 2014).