



# GEORGIA STATE SENATE SENATE RESEARCH OFFICE

204 Coverdell Legislative Office Building | 404.656.0015  
18 Capitol Square SW  
Atlanta, GA 30334

ELIZABETH HOLCOMB  
DIRECTOR

## FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON DYSLEXIA (SR 761)

### Committee Members

**Senator Fran Millar - Chair**  
**District 40**

**Senator Matt Brass**  
**District 48**

**Senator Gloria Butler**  
**District 55**

**Dr. Gary McGiboney**  
**Department of Education**

**Dr. Leslie Stuart**  
**Licensed Clinical Psychologist**

*Prepared by the Senate Research Office, 2018*

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## **STUDY COMMITTEE FOCUS, CREATION, & DUTIES**

The Senate Study Committee on Dyslexia (the “Committee”) was created with the adoption of Senate Resolution 761 during the 2018 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> The Committee was charged with undertaking a study of community-based solutions to better identify and meet the needs of dyslexic students in Georgia through early diagnosis, early remediation, and evidence based solutions. Senate Resolution 761 expressed the sense of the Senate that Georgia should keep current with other states’ policy trends on dyslexia, the most common learning disability, affecting approximately one in five individuals and approximately 80 percent of all individuals with a learning disability.

Senator Fran Millar of the 40<sup>th</sup> served as Chair of the Committee. The other legislative members included Senator Matt Brass of the 28<sup>th</sup> and Senator Gloria Butler of the 55<sup>th</sup>. The Governor appointees included: Dr. Gary McGiboney, Deputy Superintendent of External Affairs and Policy at the Georgia Department of Education; and Dr. Leslie Stuart, licensed clinical psychologist and former board member for the International Dyslexia Association, Georgia Chapter.

The following legislative staff members were assigned to this Committee: Natalie Heath of the Senate Budget and Evaluation Office; Elisabeth Fletcher of the Senate Press Office; Elizabeth Holcomb of the Senate Research Office; and Donna Nealey, Legislative Assistant to Senator Millar and Committee Secretary for the Senate Higher Education Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> See SR 761: <http://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/en-US/Display/20172018/SR/761>.

# SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY AND DISCUSSION

## **Background on Federal IDEA**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) enumerates 13 learning disability categories or conditions that make students eligible to receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP):

- Autism;
- Deaf-blindness;
- Deafness;
- Hearing Impairment;
- Emotional and Behavioral Disorder;
- Intellectual Disabilities;
- Orthopedic Impairment;
- Other Health Impairment;
- Significant Development Delay;
- Specific Learning Disability;
- Speech-Language Impairment;
- Traumatic Brain Injury; and
- Visual Impairment and Blindness.

The list of qualifying conditions includes a specific learning disability (SLD), which is defined under IDEA and its implementing regulations to include dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia:<sup>2</sup>

Specific learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. The term does not apply to students who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

However, IDEA does not provide a definition for dyslexia, nor does it dictate the services or accommodations to be provided to individual children based solely on the disability category in which the child has been classified, or the specific condition underlying the child's disability classification. These limitations of IDEA were detailed in a Dear Colleague Letter issued by OSEP in 2015. As a result, states have adopted their own dyslexia laws, definitions, and universal screening programs. These initiatives were examined by the Committee during this study.

## **Meeting 1 – August 17, 2018**

At the first meeting, background information and an overview of the issues to be studied were provided by:

- Caitlyn Dooley, PhD: Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE).

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<sup>2</sup> 34 C.F.R. §300.8(c)(10).

- Jennifer Lindstrom, PhD: Associate Professor in Special Education and Adjunct Professor, Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Georgia.
- Leslie Stuart, PsyD: Licensed Clinical Psychologist and former board member for the International Dyslexia Association, Georgia Chapter.

Chairman Millar provided introductory remarks and explained that Georgia has fallen behind when it comes to dyslexia screening and training policies in schools. After reviewing research provided by SREB, he realized that Georgia is the only state in the southeast that does not have a comprehensive program for dyslexia.

Dr. Stuart shared her expertise with the rest of the Committee and provided testimony on definitions, clinical approaches, and the misnomers associated with detecting dyslexia (e.g. reading words backwards). It is estimated that 20 percent of the population has dyslexia, 80 percent of children with learning disabilities have problems with reading, and a reading disorder alone can affect learning in most academic subjects. Dr. Stuart stressed the importance of early identification and explained that the earlier parents and teachers become aware of a child's difficulty and seek intervention, the greater the chance for that child to become a fluent reader. In short, the earlier we detect, the better the prognosis and impact of fluency.

Dr. Dooley spoke on dyslexia identification and services in Georgia on behalf of Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). State-wide intervention programs span from birth to K-12, including programs such as Babies Can't Wait, Children First, Georgia PINES, Early Intervention Program (EIP) for grades K-5, and Remedial Education Program (REP) for grades 6-12. Dr. Dooley indicated that workforce and training gaps exist in special education programs in preschool, Pre-K, and grades K-12.

GaDOE defines dyslexia in accordance with the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) as follows:

“Dyslexia is 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.”

As explained by Dr. Dooley, GaDOE plays a key role in providing general supervision across the state for local school districts to improve educational results and functional outcomes for all children with disabilities while ensuring that the requirements of IDEA are met. GaDOE's Division for Special Education Services and Supports is mandated by law to monitor compliance with IDEA, federal regulations, and rules promulgated by the State Board of Education. The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) specifically requires “a continuous review procedure designed to compare present functioning against specific standards, and to yield a profile showing areas of conformance as well as those in which new procedures, training, or other methods of improvement may be needed in order to comply with specific standards.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Pages/Georgia%27s-Continuous-Improvement-Monitoring-Process-%28GCIMP%29.aspx>.

## Meeting 2 – September 14, 2018

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Testimony was provided by the following individuals:

- Susan Adams: Deputy Commissioner for Pre-K and Instructional Support Services, Georgia Department of Early Childcare and Learning (DECAL).
- Dr. Marti Venn: Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University System of Georgia (USG).
- Ms. Ashley Jones: Director of Government Relations, USG.
- Stephen Pruitt: President of Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).
- Samantha Durrance: Policy Analyst, SREB.

Ms. Adams of DECAL provided information on dyslexia identification and services in Georgia. This included an extension list of red flags of learning disabilities in general, as well as those specific to dyslexia such large discrepancies in language, receptive, cognitive processing, and motor.

Dr. Venn of USG explained to the committee that 24 of its institutions have teacher training and preparation. Of these, 15 institutions offer a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, 6 institutions offer a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Special Education, 10 institutions offer a Bachelor of Science in Special Education, and 6 institutions offer a Master of Arts in Special Education. Teacher education curriculum includes a mandatory introductory course on special education and a survey introductory course that covers a broad range of disabilities and characteristics including dyslexia under the category of learning disabilities, definitions, IDEA eligibility, special education services and IEPs.

As Chairman Millar indicated at Meeting 1, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) served as a tremendous resource to the Committee throughout this study in terms of providing policy briefs on the implementation of dyslexia screening and training programs in other states. The following publications are available in the Appendix:

- *Appendix A: Dyslexia Policies in SREB States: Addressing the Needs of Struggling Young Readers* (Policy Brief, January 2018).
- *Appendix B: Dyslexia Policies in SREB States* (Executive Summary, January 2018).
- *Appendix C: Reading and Dyslexia Screening Components and Instruments in SREB States* (Table, October 2018).

Ms. Durrance of SREB opened with facts on promising practices in dyslexia, noting that evidence-based reading instruction and intervention is the most researched topic in learning. Other promising practices include screening to identify all at-risk readers, teacher training for dyslexia, and leveraging funds to support students with dyslexia. Ms. Durance went on to provide a survey of state screening programs and laws relating to dyslexia, which can be found in the Appendix. While no state currently screens pre-K students for reading difficulties or dyslexia, a majority of SREB states not meeting a benchmark on a universal screening must be screened for dyslexia at least once in grades K-3.

## Meeting 3 – October 19, 2018

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A third meeting was held on October 19, 2018, when the Committee received testimony from the following individuals: Phil Jacobs of Coxe Curry & Associates; Brenda Fitzgerald, Ed. S, CDP, Curriculum and Instruction Specialist at the Georgia Educational Training Agency; Penney McRoy, Director Educator in the Preparation Division of the Georgia Professional Standards

Commission; Comer Yates and Sondra Mims of the Atlanta Speech School; and Dr. Sally Shaywitz, MD, Audrey G. Ratner Professor in Learning Development, Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity at Yale University.

Ms. Fitzgerald presented on “Addressing Reading, Writing, and Spelling, and the Needs of the Dyslexia Learner.” This included a description of seven intentional, practical steps to addressing the dyslexia issues in Georgia. The Atlanta Speech School presented on “Attacking Dyslexia for All of Our Children,” stressing the importance of not leaving economically disadvantaged youth behind in this effort to address dyslexia.

Dr. Shaywitz provided a special presentation titled “Dyslexia: Aligning Education with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Science; We Know More, We Must Act Now.” This presentation highlighted her research in dyslexia, which represents the longest longitudinal study of dyslexia in the United States. Dr. Shaywitz explained to the Committee how she defines dyslexia, “as an unexpected difficulty in learning to read. Dyslexia takes away an individual’s ability to read quickly and automatically, and to retrieve spoken words easily, but it does not dampen their creativity and ingenuity.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **Meeting 4 – December 12, 2018**

The Committee met a final time, at the Capitol in Atlanta, Georgia, to discuss findings, recommendations, and adopt a final report. Chairman Millar was joined by the rest of the Committee in Room 307 of the Coverdell Legislative Office Building, where this report was approved by unanimous vote.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on Dr. Shaywitz’s research and publications, please visit <https://dyslexia.yale.edu/the-center/our-leadership/#!>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Post-Secondary Curriculum**

The University System of Georgia should develop and offer a dyslexia and language disorders course of study for college and university students studying to become public or private school teachers. Curriculum should include coursework specific to identifying the early “red flags” for dyslexia. Such signs may include but are not limited to a history of language delays in speaking and understanding, difficulty learning letters and associated sounds, difficulty rhyming, word retrieval problems, and difficulty learning calendar facts such as days of a week and months.

### **Screening in Schools and Approved Screeners**

Mandated screening for all kindergarten students should be implemented across the state. In addition, include all students kindergarten through 2nd grade, including K-2nd grade students transferring to a new school from another school or from another state who have not been screened, should be screened by teachers and/or student support staff (e.g., school nurse, school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, etc.) for phonological and phonemic awareness; sound symbol recognition; alphabet knowledge; decoding skills; encoding skills, and language skills, including expressive and receptive language, using a screener approved by the Georgia Department of Education and funded by the state.

### **Statewide Guidance, Teacher Training, and Evaluation**

The Georgia Department of Education should, with assistance from experts in both the fields of dyslexia and language, create an informational handbook that includes information about dyslexia, reading, and language disorders and how they interconnect. In addition, the Department should develop required teacher training on dyslexia and other related language disorders.

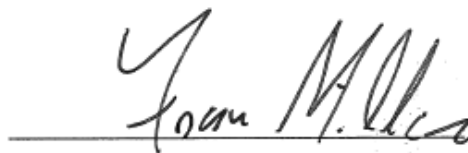
The Georgia Professional Standards Commission should create a Dyslexia Endorsement for teachers and other education staff members that would enable them to recognize and appropriately respond to dyslexia and language disorders, such as difficulty with expressive and/or receptive language ability. Such Dyslexia Endorsement may include universal screening measures to identify those at risk for dyslexia and provide public guidance as well as training opportunities for teachers and other school personnel. These screening measures should be based on empirical data obtained through direct teacher-student contact and exercises including an examination of reading and math readiness as well as receptive and expressive language processing errors. It should also establish measures to assess the fidelity of the teacher training and implementation under the Dyslexia Endorsement.

Over the course of this study, terms and definitions played an important role in understanding the complexity of the issue at hand. Therefore, any statewide guidance should use a universal definition for dyslexia.



Respectfully Submitted,

**FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON  
DYSLEXIA**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fran Millar", written over a horizontal line.

Honorable Fran Millar, Chair

Senator, District 40