



## California's New Dyslexia Guidelines: Top Ten Takeaways

by Adria Flores, M.A., Educational Specialist

Estimates of the prevalence of dyslexia in the U.S. population range from 5 to 20 percent, which equals roughly 300,000 to 1.2 million California public education students.

Despite the predominance of dyslexia, prior to the 2017 release of California's new dyslexia guidelines, parents and teachers had little information or guidance on how to assess or provide instruction for students with dyslexia. In fact, only approximately 220,000 of California's K-12 students receive special education services under the category of Specific Learning Disability in Reading.



In response to the passage of the 2015 Assembly Bill 1369, Tom Torlakson, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, along with the members of the Dyslexia Guidelines Work Group, have created a 132-page document which aims to assist teachers and parents in “identifying, assessing, and supporting students with dyslexia.” Don't have time to read all 132 pages? Not to worry, here are the top ten takeaways of California's new dyslexia guidelines:

1. **The California Dyslexia Guidelines were written in response to the 2015 Assembly Bill 1369**, which was authored by Assemblyman **Jim Frazier**, D-Oakley, and signed into law by **Gov. Jerry Brown** in October, 2015. Along with requiring the development of the Dyslexia Guidelines, the law requires schools to update the criteria for assessing struggling readers specifically for dyslexia by adding “phonological processing” to the identification process for special education eligibility.
2. **California's Dyslexia Guidelines are just that: guidelines, or suggestions, for schools and educators.** They are not mandatory or legally binding, but rather, provide practical resources for educators and parents to assist in identifying and educating students who struggle academically due to reading difficulties.
3. **The California Dyslexia Guidelines acknowledge that students with dyslexia can present with different profiles** depending on strengths, weaknesses, and age, but they also offer a description of a typical dyslexic profile. They explain this profile as a student who shows a deficit, primarily in single-word decoding, which is based in challenges with the phonological aspect of language and, secondarily, impacts reading comprehension and spelling. The Guidelines further identify common characteristics that can be indicative of

dyslexia such as an inability to sound out new words, limited sight-word vocabulary, listening comprehension which exceeds reading comprehension, and inadequate response to effective instruction and intervention.

4. **The Guidelines emphasize the critical need for educators to be informed by accurate, current, and reliable research** about evidence-based instructional strategies to assist students with dyslexia. The International Dyslexia Association's (IDA) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading are highlighted as a way for educators to be prepared to implement best practices in regard to teaching literacy.
5. **In 2015, 41 percent of fourth-grade students in California were reading below basic achievement levels, as compared with 32 percent nationally.** One of the main contributing factors to this discrepancy is identified as the lack of early and accurate identification of students with dyslexia. The California Guidelines recommend a number of ways to address this discrepancy including universal dyslexia screenings beginning in kindergarten, the use of a Multitiered System of Support and Response to Intervention and Instruction, and comprehensive language and literacy assessment of students with dyslexia.
6. **Students with dyslexia do not necessarily qualify for special educational instruction if their needs can be met within the regular educational program.** Students who are identified with a specific learning disability (LD) by an individualized education program (IEP) team are, as required by law, eligible to receive special education which may include services such as a resource specialist, pull-out program, and special education program, along with other options. In order for a student to qualify for a specific LD, they must meet certain criteria including a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement, inadequate achievement for his/her age, and a pattern of strengths or weaknesses in performance and/or achievement that is relevant to the identification of a specific LD.
7. **The use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia are allowed in evaluation, eligibility determinations, and IEP documents** under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as clarified by the Federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in a letter colleagues published in October 2015. The Guidelines also explain that students, including some students with dyslexia, may receive a 504 plan under which they can qualify for teaching strategy accommodations, such as individual or small-group instruction, written materials read to the student by the teacher, and the provision of outlines, study guides, or organizers. Students may also receive accommodations like use of audio recorded books, text-to-speech technology, and recording of lectures.
8. **All students who have dyslexia are entitled to receive structured literacy instruction, meaning an evidence-based, multisensory, direct, explicit, structured, and sequential approach to literacy instruction,** whether in general education classrooms or in a special education setting, under California Education Code Section 56335(a). A structured literacy program should include instruction of phonology, orthography, phonics, syllables, morphology, syntax, grammar, and comprehension.

9. **Training on assistive technologies, such as audiobooks, text-to-speech, smart pens, and spell checkers, is an important part of supporting students with dyslexia to eliminate barriers to learning.** Under IDEA, the school district is responsible for the purchase and training in the use of assistive technologies that are deemed necessary for a student to access general curriculum. Students with a 504 plan may also qualify for the accommodation of assistive technology.
10. **While a dyslexia diagnosis may feel overwhelming at first, it is important for parents and students to remember that children with dyslexia can go on to be successful in school and beyond.** In an extensive study of adults with dyslexia, participants revealed that support in exploring and developing their strengths; in understanding the extra time required for academic tasks; in helping others to understand dyslexia as a challenge that does not solely define them; in developing strategies for organization and time management; and in using alternative methods to access information were all critical to their success. The California Guidelines include age-appropriate steps, home-based activities, and online sources to help parents and guardians support their children with dyslexia.

*References: California Department of Education's 2017 Dyslexia Guidelines*