



# WHAT WILL IT TAKE

TO HELP MORE CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA LEARN TO READ PROFICIENTLY?

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*The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading* has galvanized efforts around the country to dramatically increase the percentage of children reading proficiently by the end of third grade—a milestone that is crucial to later academic success, including graduation from high school. The Campaign draws particular attention to the reading achievement gap between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers. To ensure that these efforts don't inadvertently leave behind another important population—children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities (LD)—the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation commissioned a paper that links research and best practices involved in helping children with LD learn to read to the broader grade-level reading movement (*Don't "Dys" Our Kids: Dyslexia and the Quest for Grade-Level Reading Proficiency*, [www.tremainefoundation.org/content/dys](http://www.tremainefoundation.org/content/dys)).

*Recommended Actions*

*by Leila Fiester*

In spring 2012, the Campaign and Tremaine convened a small group of experts in reading, learning disabilities, and general education along with researchers, funders, advocates, and practitioners to review a draft version of that paper and comment on what it will take to get more of the practices that are known to work into more of the schools, homes, and community programs that serve dyslexic children from low-income families.

Many of the comments involved recommendations for actions that can be taken by various players, from policymakers to administrators of education systems, business and civic leaders, community organizations and institutions, service providers, teachers and principals, parents, advocates, and private funders. This brief captures those suggestions and offers them to a wider audience for consideration.

The actions collected here are proposed by an informal collection of reviewers who, although highly expert in their fields, do not represent either the Campaign or the Tremaine Foundation. Therefore, *readers should not view this document as an official product of either entity. Nor does it represent the position of any organization with which the interviewees are affiliated.* Rather, it is an invitation for more potential partners to join the conversation about what can and should be done. As the Campaign and its partners begin to frame an action strategy that encompasses learning disabilities, we hope others will find inspiration and motivation in these early recommendations.



*The experts\* consulted for this action brief view the ability to read as a leading indicator for success at many levels: for the academic success of individual students, the economic success of the country's workforce and employers, and the global success that comes from being a literate nation. Given that starting point, they identified several basic features that the U.S. education system—defined broadly to include not only schools but all of the learning environments that children encounter from birth through third grade—must have if we want to improve reading proficiency for children with learning disabilities in a way that benefits everyone. These are not the only important features, but they represent a core set.*

The essential features include:

- 1 *High expectations* for all learners, coupled with accountability measures that indicate how well individual students are doing;
- 2 *Early childhood programs* that prepare children for reading and identify young children at risk of having difficulty with reading later on;
- 3 *Curricula, instructional practices and tools, and assessments* that are science-based, customized, and accessible to all students—including use of the Response to Intervention approach and Universal Design for Learning framework, implemented at high quality;
- 4 *Teacher training and ongoing professional development* that incorporate findings from neuroscience as well as best practices for how to teach reading;
- 5 *Strategic partnerships and alliances* that unify stakeholders who care about the reading proficiency of specific populations;
- 6 *Family engagement* to support and advocate for children with learning disabilities;
- 7 *Media outreach and communications* to improve understanding of learning disabilities, disseminate information, and build public demand for the necessary actions.

*What actions are necessary to put those features in place in more schools, homes, and communities—and to ensure that they reach more children with learning disabilities, especially those from low-income families? What opportunities exist to take the recommended actions? Experts consulted by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation offered the following suggestions, organized here around the seven features.*

\*See Appendix for list of participants

# High Standards

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## HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL LEARNERS

*All students have the potential to succeed, but most reach only the highest level of attainment that we expect them to reach.* When we hold some children to lower standards than others, we suppress their achievement and diminish the success of students, classrooms, and schools overall.

### Necessary actions:

- *Break down barriers between general and special education* that undermine the ability to teach children who have dyslexia or other learning disabilities. With a solid, common core of high-quality curriculum and instruction, and all students aiming to acquire the same knowledge and skills, teachers can customize the methods for getting there based on each population's strengths and needs.
- *Make Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for children with LD standards-based*, so that individualized goals and outcomes map to the standards of the general education agenda and reforms.
- *Maintain a high level of school accountability* for helping children with learning disabilities learn to read, with academic progress measured and analyzed at the individual student level.

### Opportunities for progress:

*Common Core State Standards.* The Common Core State Standards offer an opportunity to promote higher standards and better assessments for students with LD, and its K-12 English language arts and math standards include information on how to apply the standards for English language learners and students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards and are aligning curricula, assessments, professional development, and teacher evaluation systems with them, with the goal of fully implementing the standards by 2014-15.<sup>2</sup> LD advocates have suggested linking students' IEPs to the Common Core Standards, and organizations are working to develop assessments for students with LD that are linked to the Common Core Standards.

*No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) waivers.* In late 2011, the U.S. Department of Education began allowing states to request waivers to some NCLB requirements placed on schools identified for improvement, in exchange for “rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction.”<sup>3</sup> The waivers give states some flexibility in how they set annual targets for schools and student subgroups and in how they intervene with schools targeted for improvement, abandoning a one-size-fits-all approach. If used well, the waivers could produce innovative approaches for improving educational opportunities for students with LD—but the potential also exists for plans that undermine accountability for the achievement of children with LD. Therefore, LD experts are cautiously optimistic about the opportunity that waivers present.

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## Early Identification

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### EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES AND DEVELOPMENT OF “READING READINESS”

*It is possible to determine the likelihood that young children (preschool-age and younger) will develop reading difficulties,* according to a report by the National Early Learning Panel (NELP)—based on analysis of 500 peer-reviewed studies—which identified 11 early literacy skills whose presence or absence consistently predict later literacy achievement.<sup>4</sup> Yet early screenings for the precursors of LD are not routinely administered in most communities. Moreover, it is possible to identify the *existence* of dyslexia and other learning disabilities early in a child’s school or preschool experience, before he or she has experienced academic failure, using Response to Intervention (RTI) methods. Yet early RTI is not yet widely used by schools and early childhood programs.



Research shows that children do better in school when they are ready at kindergarten entry—healthy, with positive social interactions, motivation to learn, and emotional and behavioral self-control. Even more importantly, those who possess strong language skills have an advantage in learning to read.<sup>5,6,7</sup> The NELP report identified the types of instructional practices, programs, and strategies that help young children acquire language, social-emotional, and other school readiness skills, but too few children from low-income families have preschool experiences that incorporate those success factors.

#### Necessary actions:

- *Require screening of all children ages 2–5* for learning differences that might pose later difficulties with learning to read, either by early childhood program staff or physicians, and continue to screen *all* children from kindergarten through third grade.
- *Incorporate awareness of learning disabilities*, along with good practices for LD identification and intervention, into training for early childhood program staff.
- *Ensure that every child has access to a high-quality preschool program* that prepares him or her socially, emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally to succeed in school.
- *Support the further scale-up of research-based models* for early identification and intervention.

#### Opportunities for progress:

*Research linking early intervention to economic returns.* Research on the economic payoff of investment in early education—not only by Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman but also economist Clive Belfield, who has looked specifically at the education of children with disabilities—has created a research base that supports earlier intervention and school readiness efforts.

*Development of effective programs, techniques, and tools for identifying LD in very young children.* Examples include Recognition & Response, Get Ready to Read!, and the Literacy Partnership in Washington, DC, among others (see *Don't Dys Our Kids* for brief descriptions).

*Passage of state literacy laws that target early identification of struggling readers.*<sup>8</sup> For example: Utah requires school districts to set goals for student reading proficiency and conduct diagnostic reading assessments multiple times during each school year from kindergarten through third grade. Arizona requires districts to screen all children entering K–3 to ascertain their reading level and requires

third-graders who aren't proficient to be retained in grade. Oklahoma also requires schools to screen K-3 students for reading difficulties, provide interventions as needed, and retain students who continue to read below the state's "limited knowledge" level. Colorado includes early literacy results in the state's accountability system for rating schools, is improving literacy interventions in the early elementary grades, and created a preference (but not a requirement) for retaining third-graders who have "significant reading deficiencies."

In general, advocates see the movement toward state literacy laws as a chance to embed accountability for students with learning disabilities into a larger effort, although the retention of students who cannot demonstrate proficiency raises concerns unless those students receive more and better interventions during their repeated year.

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## Improved Curriculum

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IMPROVED CURRICULA, INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND TOOLS,  
AND ASSESSMENTS

*Children with learning disabilities learn to read best when their curricula and instruction are: grounded in a theoretical framework for how reading skills are acquired; based on high standards for achievement; comprehensive, addressing and interweaving all five components of the reading process; language-based, explicitly instructing students in the structure of language and the meaningful parts of words; code-based; intensive; multi-modal and multi-sensory; a combination of direct instruction in skills and instruction in strategies; diagnostic, with teachers using frequent formative assessments; personalized to each students' learning style; sequenced and segmented; scaffolded, with the teacher's prompts diminishing as students gain proficiency; explicitly organized; and asset-oriented, so that teachers focus on the student's strengths and the conditions under which learning is enabled.<sup>9</sup>*



With very few exceptions, students with LD have the ability not only to take the same courses that other students take but to take the same tests. In addition, experts agree that teachers should: use formative assessments frequently to collect individual student achievement data and use them for structured reviews of progress; break skills into sub-skills and analyze students' acquisition of those sub-skills (perhaps following up with targeted intervention) before moving the student to the next level; and develop well-defined and articulated plans for what assessments to use, how often to re-administer them, and how to link them with instruction.

The curriculum, instruction, assessments, and overall learning environment must be fully accessible to students across the spectrum of “learner variability,” as the Center for Applied Special Technology puts it. A key to ensuring accessibility for all learners is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a set of principles that provides a framework for creating highly flexible, customizable education goals, instructional methods, materials, and assessments.

Despite the growing use of UDL, however, for too many children with learning disabilities—especially those from low-income families who attend under-resourced schools—the curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments do not encompass the important qualities outlined here.

### Necessary actions:

- *Make educational goals, assessments, instruction, and materials more accessible, customized, and effective for students with LD by:*
  - Requiring individualized learning profiles for struggling students;
  - Providing more structured, direct instruction in the classroom (e.g., systemic phonics rather than incidental phonics);
  - Positioning Response to Intervention (RTI, also known as multi-tiered system of supports or MTSS) as a general education model, not a special education process (e.g., funding it through general education streams);
  - Ensuring that curricula, assessments, and instructional materials are aligned with UDL principles;
  - Working with publishers to develop materials, digital tools, and other technologies that engage children with LD in learning and are adaptable to many types of learners, and ensuring that the materials and tools reach children from low-income families in under-resourced schools;



- Educating parents about UDL and its role in helping students learn to read;
  - Providing funds for UDL research, professional development, and resources;
  - Strengthening the focus of education reform on high-quality instruction and intervention as well as systems change and capacity building; and
  - Providing incentives to develop online learning and virtual school models that welcome (and plan for) learner variability.
- *Improve assessments by:*
    - Encouraging states to apply UDL principles when developing or revising assessments;
    - Training teachers in how to administer assessments appropriately and how to analyze and apply the results; and
    - Demystifying assessment data for parents so they fully understand the data’s meaning and uses.
- *Facilitate the application of Universal Design for Learning principles by:*
    - Making UDL an allowable use of funds under Title I, teacher professional development, and curriculum programs that support reading and mathematics instruction;
    - Requiring states to check policies for unintended barriers to implementation of UDL and RTI; and
    - Requiring states to develop technical assistance to districts that want to develop UDL and RTI.

### Opportunities for progress:

*Growth of RTI.* All states are implementing RTI policy in some form,<sup>10</sup> and 12 have mandated its use either completely (Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, Rhode Island, West Virginia), in combination with other approaches (Florida, Illinois, Georgia, Maine), or partially (Delaware, New Mexico, New York).<sup>11</sup> Advocates see opportunities for more states to mandate RTI and to convert more policy guidelines into legislative and regulatory status.

*Standards for teachers of reading.* The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) has proposed standards for teachers of reading (see page 10) and recently launched an initiative to promote their value. A few states (Arizona, Ohio, Wisconsin) are incorporating the standards—which represent practices appropriate for all students, not just those with LD—into their education policies, and more are



## PROPOSED STANDARDS for the knowledge and practice of teachers of reading

The International Dyslexia Association's standards give teachers a content framework for courses and delineate proficiency requirements for the content. The standards cover such topics as:

- Basic concepts about oral and written language learning
- The structure of language
- Dyslexia and other learning disorders
- Interpreting and administering assessments
- Structured language teaching
- Professional ethics

The standards also provide guidelines for the skills needed by teachers and specialists whose students have dyslexia and other reading disabilities.

SOURCE: International Dyslexia Association, [www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/KPS12-1-10.pdf](http://www.interdys.org/ewebeditpro5/upload/KPS12-1-10.pdf)

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likely to follow. The IDA now plans to review teacher training programs, leading potentially to a “seal of approval” for those who align their programs with the IDA standards and perhaps a special certification for such programs.

*Development of state literacy laws.* Advocate and funder Cinthia Coletti Haan, in collaboration with the International Dyslexia Association's Government Affairs Committee, is developing a blueprint for state literacy legislation, based on an analysis of evidence-based policies. The blueprint, which will be disseminated via the Literate Nation advocacy group ([www.literatenation.org](http://www.literatenation.org)), includes rationales for the key principles, standards, and practices to be embedded in legislation; transcripts of model legislation; and templates that states can customize. It addresses teacher preparation, certification, and retention; data technology and uses of data; reading instruction and intervention; school-based leadership; accountability; and other topics.

*Momentum building around Universal Design for Learning.* A state-by-state scan and targeted survey, conducted by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in 2010 and updated in 2011, found that “more states and districts are now viewing UDL as a critical part of their reform efforts than ever before.”<sup>12</sup> Local leaders in these places are familiar with UDL principles and have linked them with other education initiatives, and state leaders report a strong connection between UDL and standards-based education initiatives.

*A trend toward practice-centered research.* Virginia Buysse, a lead researcher in learning disabilities based at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, sees research becoming less descriptive and correlational and more data-driven and practice-centered. For instance, she sees an opportunity for more research on how to define best teaching practices, how to get teachers to use them, and how to support teachers in using them. In this vein, in 2011 the Center for Applied Special Technology and Vanderbilt University received \$10 million over five years from the U.S. Department of Education for two national centers to develop innovative, technology-based approaches for improving literacy among students with LD. A major focus will involve applying the analytics used by businesses like Google and Amazon in an education context, to learn how students access and use knowledge. The goal is to create “self-improving education systems.”

*Emergence of strong reading programs.* Experts (including several who contributed insights to *Don't Dys Our Kids* and this action brief) in several parts of the country have developed reading programs that help struggling readers learn. It is beyond the scope of this publication to document them all, but we highlight one that is noteworthy because of its potential for scalability: Minnesota Education Corps (MEC, formerly Minnesota Reading Corps). This evidence-based model, which operates as a Tier 2 RTI approach, is a partnership between low-income schools and AmeriCorps members who receive intensive training in literacy instruction. A school-based literacy expert coaches volunteers in each school, supervised by a district-based master coach. Coaches and classroom teachers provide constant feedback to the volunteers. Assessments given three times a year identify children who need intervention and indicate specific intervention needs.

Framing the Education Corps as a strategy rather than a program, MEC's directors are coordinating efforts with other public and private initiatives. Statewide, MEC involves more than 1,000 volunteers, each of whom tutors about 20 K–3 students in small-group settings. (A preK version is also

being piloted.) Evaluators find that the approach has increased reading proficiency, as measured by passage rates on the state reading test, and significantly decreased referrals to special education.

*Efforts to link reading literacy with content literacy.* Reading proficiency is not only crucial in its own right but also because it unlocks content-area expertise in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). As Campaign Director Ralph Smith noted in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed: “Clearly, budding scientists and engineers can’t comprehend complex texts if they can’t read. At the same time, science and math have the potential to engage youngsters, encouraging them to read more.... Rather than choose between these priorities, schools should find ways to integrate literacy with STEM instruction.”<sup>13</sup> Literacy/STEM integration can be especially important for students with learning disabilities, who may have strong interest and learning ability in science or math but feel held back by their difficulty reading.

Promising opportunities to promote integration include: (1) the California STEM Learning Network, which links leaders from education, business, and the community around STEM and reading; (2) Engineering Elementary, a program that involves elementary school students in solving engineering challenges; and (3) Seeds of Science/Roots of Reading, which involves solving, reading, and writing about science activities.

*Improvement of federal laws up for reauthorization.* Both ESEA (No Child Left Behind) and IDEA are due for reauthorization, which creates an opportunity to protect the positive aspects of the laws, fix their flaws, and avoid changes that would lower standards or accountability for students with LD. The ESEA bill marked up by the Senate in 2011 makes RTI (under the name Multi-Tiered System of Supports) an allowable use of funds, which should encourage more states and districts to identify struggling learners at an earlier point in their education. It also includes funding for a preK-12 program that encourages states to address early literacy, and it incorporates Universal Design for Learning as an allowable use of funds. There are concerns, however, that other provisions could open the door to lower standards for students with LD. IDEA’s reauthorization is an opportunity to infuse the concept of standards-based Individualized Education Programs into federal legislation. Linking the IEPs required under IDEA to state standards for academic achievement would lead to more intensive instruction for students with learning disabilities and instill greater accountability for their achievement, advocates say.



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# Teacher Training

## IMPROVED TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

*Good teaching is a science and an art and thus requires knowledge, skills, and practice to master.* When teachers don't receive adequate training before entering the field, or opportunities to continue building skills and knowledge throughout their careers, or the support they need to help students overcome obstacles to learning, we can't expect them to deliver high-quality instruction in the classroom. This is true for teachers of all students, but especially those whose students need highly customized and more intensive instruction or alternate pathways to learning. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers are not trained in science-based approaches to reading instruction. The practices they know tend to be geared toward average or able readers rather than the intensive, explicit, systematic, direct, and structured approach that children with dyslexia require.

### Necessary actions:

- *Raise standards for the recruitment of new teachers* by the institutions of higher education that train teachers and the school districts that hire them to prioritize teachers who embrace science-based practices, customized instruction, and awareness of the variability in learning styles.
- *Reformulate training programs for preservice teachers* at institutions of higher education to ensure that all new elementary school teachers are trained in:
  - How the brain learns to read, based on current findings from neuroscience research;
  - The foundations and structure of the English language and literacy development;
  - The research base and best practices for reading instruction (to all students in general, and to students with LD specifically);
  - How to screen students for learning disabilities; and
  - How to assess students' reading ability, analyze performance data, and use the results to guide decisions about curriculum and instruction.
- *Strengthen the teacher certification process by:*
  - Ensuring that new teachers can demonstrate the ability to teach reading before becoming certified to teach (e.g., by requiring a separate subtest on reading instruction);

- Aligning teacher certification tests with research-based knowledge of how children learn to read;
  - Setting the cut score for passage of certification tests at a meaningful level (not artificially low);
  - Creating financial incentives for more content-area teachers to become certified in reading instruction (perhaps with support from business partners or other private funders); and
  - Encouraging alternative teacher licensing so that teachers are not limited to schools of education whose programs are not based on reading research.
- *Improve professional development for existing teachers by:*
    - Requiring continuing education and recertification that brings existing teachers up to date on the scientific research base for reading instruction (especially regarding children with learning disabilities) and on best practices for reading instruction;
    - Pairing new or struggling teachers with master teachers who can model effective reading instruction; and
    - Providing tools that make best practices understandable and easier to implement (e.g., videos that demonstrate best practices; rubrics for creating individual learning profiles).
- *Support teachers in schools and districts by:*
    - Elevating and rewarding certified teachers of reading;
    - Requiring and providing professional development in reading instruction for school administrators; and
    - Ensuring that every school has a designated person (e.g., a reading specialist coordinator) to oversee implementation of practices for helping children with LD learn to read.
- *Increase accountability and incentives for helping more students learn to read proficiently.* For example, Minnesota recently established a system for posting information on the reading interventions used with struggling kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students on school websites, which parents can access; the information also is submitted to district administrators. Minnesota also created a literacy fund that gives extra money to school districts for each third-grader who scores proficient, advanced, or above on the state's reading test.

### Opportunities for progress:

*State blueprints for closing the gap.* Several states are developing blueprints for strategies to close the achievement gap between children with LD and their non-LD peers. In 2009, for example,



Connecticut followed Massachusetts’s lead in requiring preservice teachers to take the Foundations of Reading exam, which measures knowledge of the fundamental structure of language and reading. Vermont is developing a similar blueprint that focuses on teacher training, schools’ self-assessments of their areas of need, and outreach to parents and communities as levers of change.

*State literacy laws.* Several states have developed literacy laws that focus on teacher training and certification:<sup>14</sup> For example, New Mexico requires teachers in the early grades to understand “the science of teaching reading” before they can become licensed to teach. Minnesota requires preservice teachers in grades preK–6 to pass an exam measuring their knowledge, skill, and competency in comprehensive, scientifically based reading instruction, and institutions of higher education are required to prepare new teachers to pass the test.<sup>15</sup>

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## Strategic Partnerships

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### STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES

*The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is built on the premise that coalitions of diverse but like-minded stakeholder organizations and groups—from the national to the local level—are crucial for building awareness, advocating for policy changes, and potentially scaling up successful programs and practices.*

#### Necessary actions:

- *Engage representatives of corporate America as allies and advocates of efforts to help more kids with LD learn to read proficiently and as sponsors of the recommended actions.*



- *Encourage civic organizations and public institutions to adopt principles and priorities* that lead to more screenings, earlier intervention, and better instructional practices reaching more children, especially from low-income families. For example, the United Way affiliate in Boston, Mass., requires all of the early childhood programs that it funds to include a focus on early identification and intervention of language delays. Children’s museums and public libraries that have family centers or double as school libraries offer another type of partnership opportunity, serving as venues to connect children with services and to educate parents about LD.
- *Expand community-level literacy coalitions* to reflect the full spectrum of stakeholders in education for children with learning disabilities, including people and organizations involved in civil rights, disability rights, business, education reform, and poverty reduction efforts.

### Opportunities for progress:

*Formation of broad-based coalitions.* Experts interviewed for this paper find hope in the fact that partnerships are forming among organizations, nonprofits, and schools to improve education for children with learning disabilities. For instance, an assortment of civil rights groups, business associations, state education officials, and education advocates coalesced in late 2011 to oppose federal legislation that it felt would undermine accountability for narrowing the education achievement gap experienced by students with disabilities, English language learners, students of color, and students from low-income families. At about the same time, a group known as Literate Nation came together. It started as an affinity group involving LD activists in Minnesota and Wisconsin and quickly expanded to include concerned individuals around the country; its goal is to generate public awareness of the need to improve teacher preparation in how to teach reading, for all students but especially those with LD.



# Family Engagement

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## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TO SUPPORT AND ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

*Interviewees recognized the need to mobilize parents as advocates, both for their own children and en masse as a powerful political constituency. In particular, experts called for parents to demand that educators, schools, and districts make special education more intensive, targeted, evidence-based, and aimed at helping students make more than one year's progress during a single school year. They also called for the development and use of specific frameworks for engaging families in their LD children's education, at varying levels of involvement.*

### Necessary actions:

- *Broadly disseminate information that helps parents/caregivers understand what constitutes good teaching of children with learning disabilities, so they can determine whether their children are experiencing good teaching, ask appropriate questions of their children's educators, and hold their schools and school systems accountable.*
- *Develop a clear and specific framework for involving parents and other caregivers in helping their dyslexic children learn to read. Key topics include how parents can participate in Response to Intervention, engage with educators in data-based decision making about their child's education, and advocate for their child's rights.*
- *Help teachers and school administrators acquire better skills in communicating and interacting with parents of children with LD so that both sides feel informed, supported, and productively engaged in making decisions.*

### Opportunities for progress:

New research on parent engagement. The Oak Foundation is supporting an evaluation at the National Center on Learning Disabilities that tracks which parent advocacy strategies are linked to greater academic success for students with LD.

*Emergence of powerful, parent-led grassroots advocacy.* Parent-led advocacy was the force behind enactment of Minnesota's literacy law in 2009 and similar efforts in other states.

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## MEDIA OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

*Experts on learning disabilities and education have several messages that they want the general public to hear and understand: All brains are different. Learning disabilities are not learning impairments; people with LD can be able and even gifted learners. The current system for educating children with LD is deficient in ways that diminish their academic outcomes. We know how to teach most children with LD to read; we're just not doing it. Education systems, methods, materials, and environments should be accessible to all learners, regardless of variation in students' abilities.*

These messages aren't reaching a sufficiently wide audience or having enough impact to move the needle on reading proficiency among kids with LD, however. Therefore, many experts believe it is time for a more concerted, strategic, and powerful media outreach and communications effort.

### Necessary actions:

- *Develop and support a public education campaign(s)* that “gets the facts out” about learning disabilities and reading, especially at the grassroots level.
- *Convene public events and forums* at the national, state, and local levels to highlight key data on achievement gaps and the quality of education for children with learning disabilities. Include an array of participants, including legislators, educators, parents, and business representatives.

### Opportunities for progress:

*Momentum produced by the All-America City Award.* In partnership with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, the National League of Cities selected grade-level reading proficiency as the topic for its All-America City (AAC) awards in 2012 and 2015. Broad coalitions of stakeholders in 124 cities have developed plans to improve grade-level reading. In mid-2012, this effort is poised to pivot from planning to implementation—establishing the data systems and capacity to achieve the local goals. As it does so, there will be many opportunities to link the cities' efforts around reading proficiency in general to a discussion about the specific needs of populations such as children with learning disabilities.



*The United States cannot afford to reserve the ability to read for only some populations.* Literacy is such a powerful factor in the educational achievement of individuals, the economic stability of families, the productivity of employers, the health and well-being of society, and the global competitiveness of the nation that we need everyone to be able to read—rich or poor, dyslexic or not. When large numbers of Americans cannot read proficiently, we weaken the asset that has helped this country achieve so much over time: our human capital.

Successful reading instruction is not a mystery. Researchers and skilled practitioners have demonstrated that most children can be taught to read, including those with learning disabilities—and that the type of instruction that’s good for children with LD is good for all emergent readers. But successful practices still are not reaching many (perhaps most) of the kids who are struggling readers, especially those from low-income families who attend under-resourced schools.

To dramatically improve reading proficiency for all kids, we—members of systems, schools, families, communities, legislative bodies, philanthropy, and other groups with a stake in this outcome—need to work intentionally and strategically to support more effective practices and to end ineffective ones. We need to base our policies and practices on sound science and our interventions on data while also customizing them to the needs of variable learners. And we need to take “what works” to greater scale.

If we can get more children with learning disabilities reading at grade level, we’ll have a better shot at reaching the same goal for all kids in all schools. And if we can’t move the needle for this group of struggling readers, it’s unlikely that we will succeed with the population overall.



## CONSULTATIVE SESSION PARTICIPANTS AND INTERVIEWEES

The following people participated in a consultative session on May 21–22, 2012, to inform the development of this action brief. Those identified with an asterisk were also interviewed for the background paper, *Don't Dys Our Kids: Dyslexia and the Quest for Grade-Level Reading Proficiency*:

**Meghan Barp**

*Greater Twin Cities United Way*

**Jamey Bell**

*Connecticut Voices for Children*

**Virginia Buysse\***

*Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute*

**Sally Fuller**

*Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation*

**Ralph Gardner**

*Ohio State University College of Education*

**Margie Gillis\***

*Literacy How, Inc.*

**Sally Grimes\***

*The Grimes Reading Institute*

**Cinthia Coletti Haan**

*Haan Foundation for Children*

**Jim Horan**

*Connecticut Association for Human Services*

**John Lyons**

*Burlington Public Schools*

**Christine Mason**

*National Association of Elementary School Principals*

**Nina Sazer O'Donnell**

*United Way Worldwide*

**Blanche Podhajski\***

*Stern Center for Language and Learning*

**Patricia Ralabate**

*Center for Applied Special Technology*

**Marcus Soutra III**

*Project Eye-to-Eye National*

**Susan Thomson**

*Parent Advocate for Students with Dyslexia*

**James Wendorf\***

*National Center for Learning Disabilities*

The following people were interviewed for *Don't Dys Our Kids: Dyslexia and the Quest for Grade-Level Reading Proficiency* but did not participate in the consultative session:

Clive Belfield

*Consultant, Columbia University*

Candace Cortiella

*The Advocacy Institute*

David Flink

*Project Eye to Eye*

Laura Kaloi

*National Center for Learning Disabilities*

Shelly London

*Poses Foundation*

Louisa Cook Moats

*Moats Associates Consulting, Inc.*

Stacy Parker-Fisher

*Oak Foundation*

Benjamin Powers

*Kildonan School*

Ken Pugh

*Yale University*

David Rose

*Center for Applied Special Technology*

Ashley Sandvi

*Poses Foundation*

Nancy Tidwell

*National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Disabilities*

## Notes:

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