Wilson Language Training Supports Dyslexia Legislation in Massachusetts

WHO WE ARE

Wilson Language Training (WLT), based in Oxford, Massachusetts, has been dedicated to supporting "Literacy for All" for almost 30 years. Teacher knowledge and skill mastery is at the core of our mission, empowering individual educators, schools, and districts to achieve literacy with all students in their care, including students with dyslexia.

WLT's work focuses on the education of teachers who work with individuals with dyslexia. The Wilson Reading System® (WRS), and the professional learning certifications associated with it, were developed and established in the 1980s. That work continues today as we help schools and districts develop their own capacity to successfully educate their students with dyslexia. In fact, over 4,400 teachers in Massachusetts and approximately 25,000 teachers across America have achieved WRS Level I Certification.

Wilson Language Training is accredited by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and has been recognized by Learning Forward as one of the programs for inclusion in their 2005 research-based initiative, *What Works in K-12 Literacy Staff Development*.

WHY DYSLEXIA LEGISLATION IN MASSACHUSETTS IS IMPORTANT

Dyslexia legislation in Massachusetts is critical since the incidence of dyslexia in the general population is very high, affecting up to 20% of the population (The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, n.d.). For individuals with dyslexia, early identification and instruction from a well-trained teacher using an effective program can be life changing. These can alter the course of one's educational attainment, self-esteem, and future career and personal goals since the struggles for students with dyslexia affect not just their English/language arts class, but all aspects of life inside and outside of school. Poor literacy skills increase the odds that the person will drop out of high school, and research points to a connection between high dropout rates and high incarceration rates, high unemployment rates, and low income (NYS Center for School Safety, 2009; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).

Research has shown us that students who are identified early and receive appropriate multisensory structured language instruction will make gains in the early years of their education (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006). Moreover, early intervention can increase the activation of key areas in the brain for reading (Shaywitz et al., 2004).

Students with dyslexia who go undiagnosed or do not receive the appropriate intervention may be able to use their intelligence to figure out how to "work around" their disability and mask their challenges for a while. But, eventually, the inability to read catches up with them. And when these students are diagnosed in adolescence, squeezing sufficient intervention time into a school schedule can be daunting. Research has shown that it takes four times longer to improve a student's skills in fourth grade than it does in kindergarten (Hall, 2011). Since we know from extensive experience what these students need to be successful, it is incumbent upon us to act accordingly.

MULTISENSORY STRUCTURED LANGUAGE (MSL) INSTRUCTION

Individuals with dyslexia need specific, intensive instruction utilizing an Orton-Gillingham based approach, also referred to as Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) instruction. This instruction can be enhanced through other curriculum and technology tools. In MSL instruction, learning incorporates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile pathways simultaneously to enhance mastery of the language

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structure involved with reading and writing. In addition, instruction is intensive, direct, systematic and cumulative, diagnostic, and both synthetic and analytic (i.e., students learn how to take parts of language structure and put them together, or given the whole, break it into its parts). The MSL approach to instruction helps students understand the structure of the language in a very systematic way.

Brain scans have demonstrated that effective interventions can rewire the brain. Our WRS program was the focus of one study that demonstrated that the use of the program with a qualified instructor led to improved reading ability and changed students' brain activity. Researchers found improvement in brain function as well as rewiring of the brain to function similarly to that of a good reader (Keller & Just, 2009; Meyler, Keller, Cherkassky, Gabrieli, & Just, 2008).

Supplemental tools can also be combined with MSL instruction to meet students' needs. Leveraging the reach of a mobile device, the computing power and connectivity of the cloud, and advanced data analytics, apps can be developed that are adaptive, customizing the learning experience to students' specific needs by adjusting to the user's strengths and weaknesses. This provides for rich and interactive learning experiences that can go more in depth than traditional methods, while giving teachers the control and support they need. Adaptive technologies/software offer the prospect of allowing students to continue to learn and reinforce skills that they need before moving on to more complex skills. These tools, however, do not eliminate the need for a highly trained dyslexia specialist to work with an individual with dyslexia.

TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The specific, intensive instruction students with dyslexia need requires the specialized skills of a highly trained teacher. These specialists are still necessary in order to understand the type of instruction a student requires, identify an appropriate intervention program, understand whether that program is working, think diagnostically about what to do when it is not working, and know how to provide the motivational support and educational guidance that technology tools cannot provide.

Both teacher knowledge and the practical ability to apply this knowledge in a real-life setting are crucial (Hattie, 2012). To successfully teach students with dyslexia, teachers must have an in-depth knowledge about reading instruction, including the structure of the English language—meaning its phonology, morphology, and orthography. But, they must also be able to take this knowledge and successfully instruct a student who does not easily learn it. The second part is critical. Without that, teachers have the knowledge but not the skill to succeed.

EDUCATOR TRAINING

While we have identified the knowledge teachers must have and the skills they must be able to apply when working with students, how do we support teachers in acquiring these? One aspect of effective implementation is training. From our experience, we believe that teachers working with individuals with dyslexia need a clinical teaching experience (practicum) to be able to take book-learning and knowledge and translate that into practical application in the classroom. The practicum should be under the supervision of an experienced individual who has taught people with dyslexia how to read, and has attained a deep level of knowledge and experience. The Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators (AOGPE), Wilson Language Training (WLT), and training programs accredited by the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC) each provide a training that incorporates both the knowledge and supervised practical experience to prepare teachers to work with students with dyslexia. Hiring teachers with a certification from one of these organizations, or from the Academic Language Therapy Association (ALTA), provides a level of assurance that these teachers have received the right preparation for working with students with dyslexia.

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CONCLUSION

Screening and early identification of students with dyslexia followed by instruction from a highly trained teacher using an evidence-based multisensory structured language intervention can make all the difference to the lives of individuals with dyslexia, reducing its potentially devastating life effects. Since we know how to help these children learn to read, we must do just that, giving these children the opportunity to experience the world through the eyes of a reader, and providing teachers and administrators the access to tools and research necessary to deliver on the promises of education in the United States.

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