



A Roadmap for a Student with a Suspected Reading Disability

1. What can I do to help my child obtain the education that he deserves?

The most important thing that you can do for your child is to become his ardent advocate. You must acquire information that will arm you with the information you need to persuade school administrators that you know the law, that you understand reading and what your child needs to get back on track. Due to its sheer size and lack of funding, the public school system is not designed to meet the needs of every child. To ensure that your child receives what he needs, you must fight for him. You will become discouraged and you might feel like giving up but don't. Find a parent support group or start one. There are other parents in your school who feel similarly. Join together, share stories. What worked? What didn't? What should I do now? Support each other.

Attached is a list of resources that can help you through the process. Again, read, read, and read. Arm yourself with the information you need to get what your child deserves. Don't take no for an answer, and, most importantly, don't give up! There is too much at stake.

2. What is a reading disability?

Simply stated, a reading disability is the inability of a child, with otherwise good potential, to read fluently (with accuracy and appropriate pace) and/or with good comprehension. For most students, the reading disability affects the child's ability to read accurately the printed word. The inability to read isolated words affects the child's ability to read fluently—with accuracy and proper speed. We all have limited cognitive capacity. If a child is spending an inordinate amount of mental energy in reading words on the page, he/she does not have enough mental capacity to make meaning of what he is reading and comprehension suffers. It is critical that children reach a level of automaticity with decoding words so that they have the mental energy to process what they are reading.

Reading disabilities are the most prevalent form of a learning disability, accounting for about 80% of all learning disabilities. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of English speakers have a reading/spelling disability, dyslexia. Students with dyslexia fall on a continuum. One can be mildly affected or significantly affected. The good news is that the prognosis for dyslexic children is good, especially if they are identified early. Unfortunately, many educators do not want to stigmatize children by labeling them with a learning disability so they are reluctant to recommend children for an evaluation that would determine whether a child had a reading disability, another type of learning disability, or whether that child might have an attention deficit. Other educators believe it is a maturity issue and that the reading "light bulb" will go on when the child's brain has sufficiently matured. Both attitudes do a tremendous disservice to dyslexic children.



3. Are there signs to look for in children who may develop a reading disability?

Yes, there are signs that you can look for that are good predictors of children who might develop a reading disability (dyslexia). These include:

- Family history of dyslexia
- Late in developing oral language
- Confusion with spatial directions—up, down, under, over etc.
- Difficulty knowing the seasons of the year or the months of the year
- Difficulty rhyming or playing with words/language
- By the end of kindergarten, children should be able to identify the letters of the alphabet
- Difficulty learning to read in first grade; can't associate letters with sounds
- Tries to memorize words rather than knowing how to sound them out
- Child remains fixed in the inventive spelling stage; spelling does not improve despite instruction
- Not interested in books—even being read to
- Behavior changes when starting school

4. What should I do if I suspect my child has a reading disability?

If your child has one or more of the above characteristics, you should have your child evaluated. An evaluation includes a cognitive assessment, the WIPSI for children under age seven and generally the Wisc IV for children aged seven and older. In addition to the cognitive assessment, your child should have achievement tests in reading including: a test of phonological processing; isolated real and nonsense words; sight words; connected text for fluency; and reading comprehension. The Woodcock-Johnson Achievement subtests of word identification and word attack are often used for the isolated word reading; the Gray-Oral Reading Test is a good assessment for oral reading fluency; and the Gray-Silent Reading Test is a good measure for reading comprehension. For younger students, the Gray-Oral may also be used for comprehension. Your child should also be given a spelling assessment and a written language assessment as well. A good evaluation will also include a math assessment (again, the math subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Tests are often used to assess a child's math ability). If you suspect that your child has a language processing difficulty and/or an attention deficit disorder, you should request testing in these areas as well.

You have two choices with regards to how an evaluation is completed. You may request testing from your local public school. A copy of a letter requesting services from your school is included with this roadmap. Please feel free to individualize it for your child and your child's school. The school has 15 days to present an assessment plan to you. You then have 15 days to sign off on the plan or to offer revisions to the plan. Once you have signed off on the assessment plan, the school has 60 days to complete the evaluation and have an IEP (Individual Education Plan) to discuss the results and offer services if my child qualifies.

You may also have your child evaluated privately. Typically, a private evaluation is more thorough and the recommendations are more specific to the needs of your child. Depending upon the depth of the evaluation, costs can range from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Be sure that the evaluator, usually an educational psychologist, has the proper credentials to give the cognitive



assessment. To find a qualified evaluator, you could do an internet search for an educational psychologist in your area. We recommend interviewing a few to determine who would be a good fit for your child. Questions to consider asking include:

1. Are you licensed to give the Wisc IV?
2. Do you have a background in reading and understand why certain students struggle with reading?
3. How many evaluations have you given to students with reading disabilities?
4. Do you provide a written report after the evaluation?
5. What types of recommendations do you provide?
6. Do you conference with parents both before and after the evaluation?

Most professionals who have an assessment business will provide you with a written report and a follow-up conference to discuss the report; most will also want to meet with you before giving your child an assessment as they will want to learn more about your child before giving him/her an assessment. If pre and post conferences and a written report are not part of a particular practitioner's practice, we recommend looking for another professional to conduct the assessment. You are spending a great deal of money for this service, and it is critical that your child receive a comprehensive evaluation and that you receive a thorough written report detailing your child's strengths and weaknesses with specific recommendations. This document will be used to determine whether your child qualifies for services from your local public school. If you are leaning toward having your child evaluated privately, you may first want to check with the special education director at your local school to be sure that the school will accept the testing of the individual whom you are considering.

5. My child has been evaluated. Now what?

If your child was evaluated at your local public school, the special education director should have called for an IEP meeting to discuss the testing results (within 60 days of your signing the assessment plan). If you had the testing done privately, present the testing to the special education of your local public school and request a date be scheduled for an IEP meeting. As mentioned previously, be sure to check with the special education director of your child's school before arranging for a private evaluation to be sure that the school will accept this testing.

To determine whether a student qualifies for special services, an IEP team will meet. The IEP team generally consists of the special education director, the child's teacher(s), the parents, special education teacher(s), and any specialists such as a speech and language therapist or an occupational therapist. The team will discuss the results of the testing and whether your child qualifies for special services. In general, schools use a discrepancy model in determining whether a child qualifies. Using a discrepancy model for qualifying a student for services, a student's academic achievement will generally have to fall 1.5 standard deviations from his potential (his IQ score). There is a significant caveat to be aware of in using this model. First, a student's overall IQ score as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Test is a composite score of four subtests including: verbal comprehension, perceptual reasoning, processing speed, and working memory. Many students with learning disabilities have much higher verbal reasoning skills (verbal comprehension subtest) than their overall IQs. Their working memory and processing speed scores tend to be much lower, thus pulling down their overall IQs. Many school administrators will make their decision regarding eligibility based on the discrepancy



between their achievement scores in specific reading, writing, and math skills and their overall IQs, not their higher verbal reasoning skills. This is an injustice to the child, and you should demand the discrepancy be between the highest subtest score and his/her IQ. Many students will qualify for services by applying this reasoning to the decision whether to qualify a particular student.

It is also important to note that in 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized and signed into law. According to this reauthorization, a state **must not require** the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability. The state must also permit the use of a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention (RTI). Finally, the state may permit the use of other alternative, research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability. So if the school states that your child does not qualify for services because there isn't a large enough discrepancy between his/her intellectual ability and his/her achievement scores, you should pursue qualifying your child with these other options.

If you feel that you are not being heard when advocating for your child, you may want to consider retaining the services of an education advocate or an attorney who specializes in educational law. Sometimes this is what it takes to have your voice heard at the table.

6. My child qualifies for services. Now what?

If the IEP team determines that your child qualifies for special services, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will be written detailing the specific goals and objectives that his/her teachers will be helping him to meet during the course of the school year. It is very important that the goals and objectives that are created are specific, measurable, realistic, and relevant to your child's disability. If he/she qualifies for services due to a reading disability, we recommend that you include reading goals that include progress in his reading achievement tests of more than one year. For example, if your child is two years behind in reading, you will want to establish an annual goal of more than one year per year in school. Otherwise, he/she will never close the gap between his reading level and his/her grade level. Students on an IEP should be given achievement tests annually to be sure they are making adequate yearly progress. Annual achievement testing usually happens in the late winter through the spring. An annual IEP meeting should be held after the testing has occurred. The purpose of the IEP meeting is to discuss progress towards the goals and objectives of the IEP as well as to discuss the achievement testing results. The IEP team will then determine if the child continues to qualify for an IEP. If he/she does, the IEP will be changed to reflect new goals for the coming school year. If the child has not made adequate progress, a new intervention/program should be explored.

It is critical that throughout the process of requesting testing and establishing an IEP for your child that you become a strong advocate for your child. School personnel are stretched thin and most special education departments have very high caseloads, and often your child is just another child in need of services. You may or may not receive the attention that you feel your child deserves. Know your rights (see attached resource list) and fight for your child!



7. Now that my child has qualified for services, what should we be looking for?

Your child requires an intervention to close the gap between his potential and his actual achievement in reading. This should be reflected in his IEP. The intervention will be dependent upon where the process of reading is breaking down for him, hence the importance of your child having a good assessment. Most students who struggle with reading have an issue with decoding, or being able to apply word attack strategies to individual words. If they struggle with decoding, they will struggle with reading fluently, which is a requisite to have good comprehension. In general, there are two reasons for decoding issues. One is that a student does not have a solid foundation with phonemic awareness skills. Phonemic awareness has to do with the child's ability to sequence, segment, and manipulate the sounds found within words. If a child has poor phonemic awareness skills, it will be very difficult for him to understand that abstract visual representations, letters, have a sound correspondence. Symbol-sound correspondences are referred to as phonics. The child's phonemic awareness needs to be developed so that he can sequence, segment, and manipulate sounds and phonemic awareness goals and objectives should be developed in his IEP.

As mentioned, phonics includes symbol-sound correspondence ("c" usually is pronounced like "k" as found in the word "cat." However, when the letter "c" is followed by "i," "e," or "y," the "c" is pronounced as a "s" as in "city," "cent," and "cycle."). Phonics also includes word attack strategies so that students have tools to unlock the code. For example, students learn that when there is a vowel, consonant, consonant, vowel construction as in the word "splendid," the word should be divided between the two medial consonants. Thus "splendid" would be divided as such, "splen/did". Being able to breakdown a word into its component syllables provides a tool for children to unlock the reading code independently.

As students learn to decode individual words, they must also practice oral reading of connected text. Learning to read fluently is important so that a student has the mental energy to process what he is reading. Fluency also needs to be taught and practiced and fluency goals and objectives should be included within your child's IEP if it is a weakness.

Finally, even when students reach fluency, they may still struggle with reading as comprehension eludes them. Comprehension can breakdown at various levels. Perhaps the student doesn't understand important vocabulary from the passage; perhaps he is not familiar with the structure of the written form (Is it a narrative (story) or expository text. If it's expository, is it cause and effect, persuasive, sequential, descriptive, comparison, problem and solution, etc.); perhaps he doesn't have enough background information about the topic; or perhaps he is a more literal thinker. Just as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency need to be taught directly and systematically, vocabulary acquisition and the teaching of comprehension skills require the same approach.