

History of AB 110

In 2018, following a grass roots campaign by members of Decoding Dyslexia-Wisconsin, the International Dyslexia Association-Wisconsin (IDA-WI), and the Wisconsin Reading Coalition, the Joint Legislative Council created a Study Committee on the Identification and Management of Dyslexia. The committee was led by Chair Rep. Bob Kulp and Vice-Chair Sen. Patty Schachtner. Legislative members of the committee included Rep. Rohrkaste, Rep. Stuck, and Sen. Tiffany. Public members, selected by the Joint Legislative Council for their expertise and experience with dyslexia, included Nancy Dressel (curriculum director who also has dyslexia), Steven Dykstra, PhD (clinical psychologist and founding member of Wisconsin Reading Coalition), Donna Hejtmanek (reading specialist with special education background), Ann Malone (speech and language pathologist who is the former director of the Children's Dyslexia Center-Madison and is certified in Structured Literacy), Dr. Brenda Warren (pediatrician and school board president who has a son with dyslexia), and Michael Weber (district superintendent). No members of the Wisconsin State Reading Association (WSRA) were selected for the committee, which they felt was unfair. Rep. Kulp accommodated WSRA by letting them sit at the table and participate in committee discussions, though they did not have a vote.

After hearing testimony that families and educators were having difficulty accessing information and resources related to dyslexia and related conditions, and that children with dyslexia were failing to reach their academic potential while often developing behavioral and social problems, the committee requested a bill to create a dyslexia guidebook for Wisconsin. The guidebook is informational only, with no mandated changes in district practices.

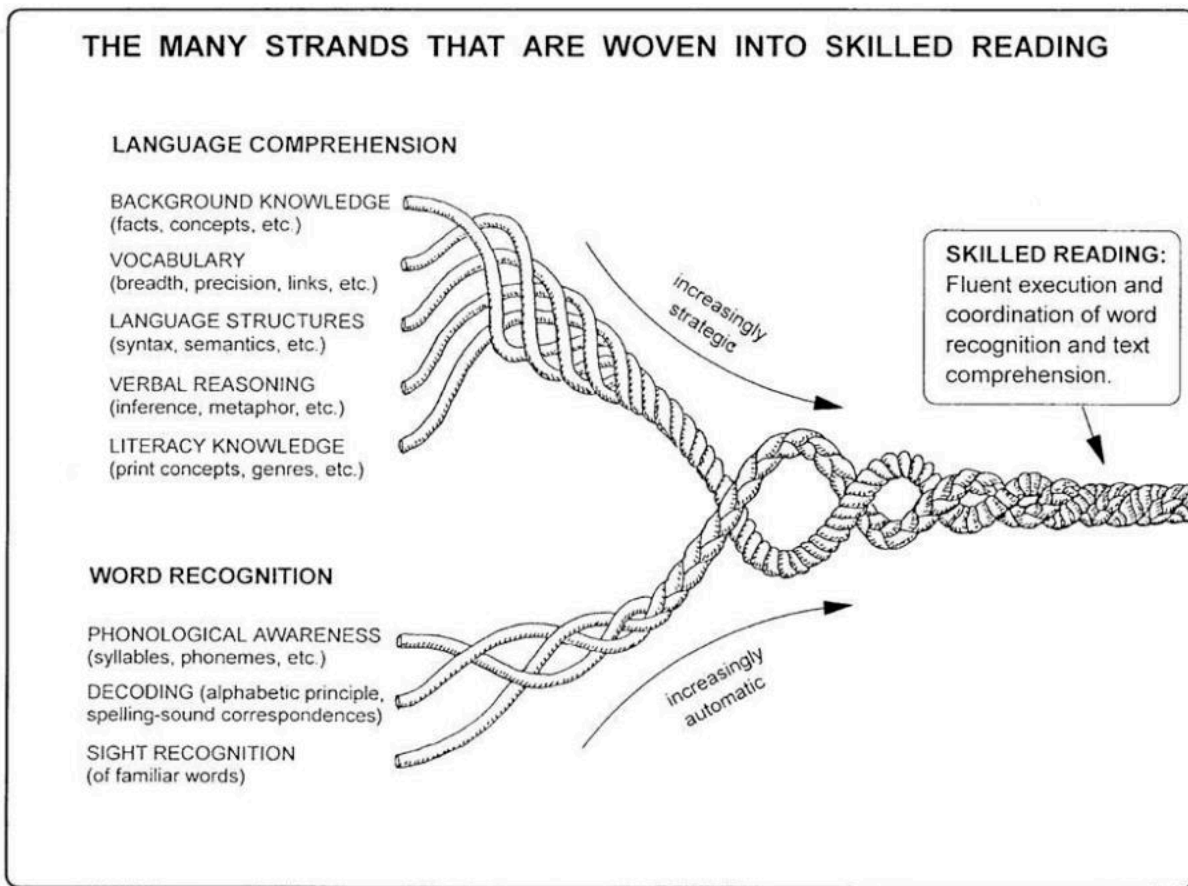
The preliminary draft referred to a "Guidebook Related to Reading Difficulties and Dyslexia," which was to be prepared by an advisory committee representing a wide variety of constituencies. In the final draft, the committee changed the title of the guidebook to "Guidebook on Dyslexia and Related Conditions," more closely reflecting the scope of the study committee, and called for an advisory drafting committee comprising a co-chair and 8 members from IDA-WI, a co-chair and 8 members from WSRA, and one member from DPI. A non-statutory provision calls for basing the guidebook on the dyslexia definition of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), which is widely used in education and research and similar to all other major definitions of this disorder. The resulting bill AB 110 was introduced by the Joint Legislative Council. After a public hearing and an amendment to prevent individuals with financial conflicts of interest from serving on the advisory drafting committee, the bill passed the Assembly Education Committee on a party line vote and passed the full Assembly by a vote of 76 to 21. AB 110 received a public hearing in the Senate Education Committee on August 13, 2019.

WSRA has registered in opposition to the bill, arguing that the guidebook should cover all struggling readers, not focusing on those with dyslexia, and that the IDA definition of dyslexia should not be required for the drafting of the guidebook. They have not specified their objections to the IDA definition or suggested an alternate definition.

What problems led to the convening of the Study Committee and drafting of AB 110?

Parents, tutors, and teachers of children with dyslexia have been concerned for at least two decades with inadequate reading achievement by these students. On both state academic tests and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Wisconsin students with disabilities, a large number of whom have dyslexia, perform very poorly. (According to the National Institute of Health and the American Psychiatric Association, approximately 80% of students with specific learning disabilities have dyslexia. Students with severe cognitive disabilities are not included in this NAEP sample.) On the 2017 NAEP, 76% of Wisconsin 4th graders with disabilities performed at the below basic category, which means they are missing the “prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work” in school.

Reading is the gateway skill for all academic work as well as life success. Problems in reading lead to academic failure and very often result in stress, anxiety, depression, and anger. A large percentage of students who are not proficient in reading by 4th grade will become high school dropouts, and many develop behavioral issues that lead them to interactions with the juvenile justice system. Large percentages of the prison population are illiterate.



Graphic by Hollis Scarborough. PhD

Of the skills necessary for reading comprehension (see reading rope graphic above), dyslexia involves weaknesses in the word recognition skills. Students with dyslexia may have co-occurring deficits in language comprehension, or may develop them over time with lack of reading experience, but the defining deficit is word recognition. Attempts to arrange effective intervention for word recognition in Wisconsin schools are often not successful. There is a lack of understanding about the nature of dyslexia as well as appropriate instructional treatments. DPI takes a hands-off approach, leaving all decisions up to local districts.

Effective intervention for word recognition problems involves explicit and systematic instruction in the sounds of speech and how those sounds are represented in print, including sound/letter correspondences, syllable types, roots and affixes, and spelling conventions. Because the dyslexic brain makes it difficult to develop the pathways necessary for accurate, effortless reading, intervention must be timely, intensive, and include continuous review. Students struggling with word recognition for reasons other than dyslexia (related conditions) benefit from the same type of instruction, and therefore should be included in the guidebook. However, it is beyond the scope of a dyslexia guidebook to include detailed information on reading struggles that involve language comprehension weaknesses.

Unfortunately, beginning reading instruction in many Wisconsin classrooms and intervention settings focuses heavily on language comprehension rather than word recognition. For word recognition, students are often taught ineffective strategies of memorizing whole words or guessing at unfamiliar words using pictures, context, or sentence syntax. Even in cases where the school recognizes the need for structured decoding/encoding instruction, teachers often report that they were not adequately trained in language structure in their teacher preparation programs. This is reflected in the fact that only 66-68% of teaching candidates pass the Wisconsin Foundations of Reading Test on the first try.

Is a Dyslexia Guidebook an Appropriate Solution?

Eighteen other states have published dyslexia guidebooks to present accurate, research-based information on the characteristics, identification, and treatment of dyslexia and related word recognition conditions. Similarly, a Wisconsin guidebook will collect reliable information in a user-friendly format for families, teachers, and administrators. While nothing is mandatory, this is a good first step toward alleviating some of the confusion that surrounds this common disability.

A guidebook by itself is not enough to change the educational and life trajectory of dyslexic students, but is a critical first piece of the solution. Once basic information is established and available, it will be easier to work on the more difficult issues of improving teacher preparation in reading, providing useful professional development to teachers in the field, and enabling districts to identify assessment tools and instructional resources that align with reading science.

The complaints of WSRA are without foundation. Success of a dyslexia guidebook can serve as a model for one or more guidebooks on language comprehension issues, writing problems, or even math disabilities.

One thing is certain: to do nothing ensures that nothing will improve.