

COMMENTS ON DYSLEXIA LEGISLATION
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David A. Kilpatrick, PhD (Syracuse University, 1994)
Associate Professor of Psychology
State University of New York, College at Cortland
New York State Certified School Psychologist
Author of *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Correcting Reading Difficulties* (Wiley, 2015)
I have conducted over 1,000 evaluations of students with reading difficulties in 28 years with the East Syracuse-Minoa Central School District. Also, I have taught upper-level college courses in learning disabilities and educational psychology since 1994.

Having evaluated hundreds of students from who displayed significant difficulties in reading, I have had very direct experience with the issues raised by the Alaska bill that is now before the legislature. My field of school psychology typically does not provide adequate graduate exposure to the vast and heavily grant-funded area of reading research. I was not exposed to this scientific endeavor until 1997, when I had already been a practicing school psychologist for nine years. Fortunately, I had access to the research journals because I was an adjunct professor for the State University of New York at that time. Typically, scientific journals are only accessible by those working at or attending a university. I spent the next 18 years with one foot in public education and another in a university and research context. The gap between the two could not have been wider.

Multiple sources such as the American Federation of Teachers, the Journal of Learning Disabilities, the Society for Scientific Study Reading, and the federal government, have all highlighted the substantial gap between scientific research on reading and the actual classroom practice in our schools. I found that there were not many useful and reliable resources available that communicated the best available research to the teachers, administrators, and school psychologists who needed it the most. This situation prompted me to write *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Disabilities*, which is functionally reading research's "greatest hits" in terms of useful information for educators. This resource has been positively reviewed by publications from the International Dyslexia Association and the National Association of School Psychologists. My extensive review of the reading literature is consistent with previous reviews, such as the National Reading Panel, but provides updated information from the intervening 15 years.

Exciting findings about reading have resulted from large federal grant initiatives. These findings show that with changes in how we teach reading, we can prevent about one half to two thirds of the reading difficulties that we currently see. Also, for children who show reading difficulties, about half or more of them can get up to grade level and stay there for the long run. And for those who continue to struggle despite these encouraging efforts, studies show they can learn to read at a higher level than we have seen from such students in the past.

The findings from the studies coming out of these federal grant initiatives were so impressive that it was determined that these outcomes needed to become more

widespread. This prompted the development of the “response to intervention” (RTI) movement. However, the sad story behind RTI is that the implementation of RTI focused on the process, the steps, the procedures, the levels, and the universal screenings, but the nature of the highly successful prevention and intervention techniques were never adequately communicated. Rather, teachers and administrators were simply told they needed to use “research-based approaches” without being told what those were. This created a vacuum that has been filled primarily by continuing with the approaches schools had been using previously, except within a new framework. As a result, reading achievement since the RTI began has been largely similar to reading achievement prior to RTI. A large-scale federal review of RTI published in November 2015 indicated that RTI remediation was not working. While disappointing, this outcome was not surprising given that there is no evidence of widespread use of the kind of instructional and intervention approaches that resulted in the highly successful outcomes that prompted the development of RTI in the first place.

It is my hope that an Alaskan task force would incorporate and foster the dissemination of the knowledge base necessary to allow children in Alaska to receive the most highly effective general educational classroom instruction and remedial interventions. I would be happy to direct any task force members toward the research with those highly successful outcomes. I have had the fortunate opportunity to see this type of instruction firsthand in some real schools that have been willing to break with tradition and apply the scientific findings. The outcomes have been nothing short of amazing. It appears that the only barrier to the use of these effective instructional approaches is the lack of familiarity with these approaches and with the benefits they can provide.

With over 28 years of experience in public education, I firmly believe that teachers and administrators are trying to do the best they can, given what they know. An Alaskan task force can assist in improving the teacher knowledge base regarding reading acquisition and the most highly effective approaches to preventing and correcting reading problems.

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