

## Rigor and Assessment in the Classroom

by Barbara R. Blackburn, PhD

Instructional rigor is a key component of effective instruction. Too often, we think our instruction is rigorous, but it is not. Our assumptions about rigor, as well as our practices, make a difference in what we expect from students.

In *Rigor is Not a Four Letter Word*, I define rigor as “creating an environment in which...

- each student is expected to learn at high levels,
- each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and
- each student demonstrates learning at high levels.”

Notice we are looking at the environment you create. The tri-fold approach to rigor is not limited to the curriculum students are expected to learn. It is more than a specific lesson or instructional strategy. It is deeper than what a student says or does in response to a lesson. True rigor is the result of weaving together all elements of schooling to raise students to higher levels of learning. Let's take a deeper look at the three aspects of the definition.

### Expecting Students to Learn at High Levels

The first component of rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels. Having

high expectations starts with the recognition every student possesses the potential to succeed at his or her individual level.

Almost every teacher or leader I talk with says, “We have high expectations for our students.” Sometimes that is evidenced by the behaviors in the school; other times, however, faculty actions don't match the words. There are concrete ways to implement and assess rigor in classrooms.

As you design lessons that incorporate more rigorous opportunities for learning, you will want to consider the questions that are embedded in the instruction. Higher-level questioning is an integral part of a rigorous classroom. Look for open-ended questions, ones that are at the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis).

It is also important to pay attention to how you respond to student questions. When we visit schools, it is not uncommon to see teachers who ask higher-level questions. But for whatever reason, we then see some of the same teachers accept low-level responses from students. In rigorous classrooms, teachers push students to respond at high levels. They ask extending questions. Extending questions are

questions that encourage a student to explain their reasoning and think through ideas. When a student does not know the immediate answer but has sufficient background information to provide a response to the question, the teacher continues to probe and guide the student's thinking rather than moving on to the next student. Insist on thinking and problem solving.

### Supporting Students to Learn at High Levels

High expectations are important, but the most rigorous schools assure each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, which is the second part of our definition. It is essential teachers design lessons that move students to more challenging work while simultaneously providing ongoing scaffolding to support students' learning as they move to those higher levels.

Providing additional scaffolding throughout lessons is one of the most important ways to support your students. Oftentimes students have the ability or knowledge to accomplish a task, but are overwhelmed at the complexity of it, therefore getting lost in the process. This can occur in a variety of ways, but it requires teachers to ask themselves during every step of their lessons, “What extra support might my students need?”

## Examples of Scaffolding Strategies

- Asking guiding questions
- Chunking information
- Highlighting or color-coding steps in a project
- Writing standards as questions for students to answer
- Using visuals and graphic organizers such as a math graphic organizer for word problems, maps to accompany history lessons or color coded paragraphs to help students make meaning of texts

### Ensuring Students Demonstrate Learning at High Levels

The third component of a rigorous classroom is providing each student with opportunities to demonstrate learning at high levels. A teacher recently said to us, “If we provide more challenging lessons that include extra support, then learning will happen.” What we’ve learned is that if we want students to show us they understand what they learned at a high level, we also need to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate they have truly mastered that learning. In order for students to demonstrate their learning, they must first be engaged in academic tasks, precisely those in the classroom.

Student engagement is a critical aspect of rigor. In too many classrooms, most of the instruction consists of teacher-centered, large-group instruction, perhaps in an interactive lecture or discussion format. The general practice during these lessons is for the teacher to ask a question and then call on a student to respond. While this provides an opportunity for one student to demonstrate understanding, the remaining students don’t do so.

Another option would be for the teacher to allow all students to pair-share, respond with thumbs up or down, write their answers on

small whiteboards and share their responses or respond on handheld computers that tally the responses. Such activities hold each student accountable for demonstrating his or her understanding.

### Assessment

In addition to rigor, assessment is a key part of the learning process. Almost every researcher on assessment has developed criteria for effective assessment. Although there are some differences from individual researchers, generally, there are seven key principles (see table below).

### Informs and Transforms

Effective assessment informs both the teacher and the student, but it also transforms the teaching and learning experience. Assessment provides information to the teacher about what students know and do

not know, which allows him or her to adjust instruction. For example, if all students missed question 12 on a test, but answered all others questions on the same objective correctly, that would lead you to evaluate the question to determine if it was clear to the students. You might reword the question on future tests.

On the other hand, if, in looking at the results of a summative assessment, you discover 21 of your 28 students missed all questions related to a particular objective, then it is likely your instruction of the objective was not as effective as you thought. Therefore, reteaching is needed.

Assessment should also inform teachers and students about individual strengths and weaknesses. This allows for differentiation of instruction, both in terms of

## Seven Principles of Effective Assessment

1. Informs and transforms
2. Comprehensive
3. Aligned
4. Developmentally appropriate
5. Quality
6. Involves students
7. Results are effectively communicated

remediation and enrichment. Truly effective assessment transforms the teaching and learning experience. The information is not simply provided; teachers and students use that information to improve. In the first example given, if the teacher simply says, “That was a bad question,” then so what? But if he or she analyzes what made the question confusing and applies that knowledge to writing future questions, that is transformative.

In the second example, when a teacher actually revisits the content so students can master it, the assessment has transformed the instruction. And in terms of learning about individual strengths and weaknesses, transformation occurs when the student, with the teacher’s guidance, improves on weaknesses and builds on strengths to learn at new levels.

### Comprehensive

Second, effective assessment is comprehensive. Rather than using assessment as a single snapshot, effective assessment uses multiple types of assessment frequently. It’s important to use different types of assessment because not all students demonstrate learning in the same way. Some students perform well on traditional tests. Others become anxious and can score at a low level, even if they understand the content. Using a variety of measures, including tests, gives you a broader view of what students have learned.

Part of the comprehensive nature of assessment is to use them frequently. When I was teaching, everyone assessed on Friday. The students called it “test day” because that was all they did. There were two problems with that approach. First, assessment didn’t happen at natural times—the

tests drove the schedule. Second, one assessment a week wasn’t enough to truly know where students were in the learning process.

Robert Marzano in *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Works*, found that frequency was a key measure of student achievement. Although weekly assessment was considered a good minimum, student achievement increased as frequency of assessments increased.

Another reason to use more frequent assessments is to lower the high-stakes measure of a single assessment. I remember my first job at the university. My department chair insisted all professors have at least four tests or assignments per class. Her perspective was that one assignment or test should not make or break a grade for a student. I agreed. How could one assessment truly measure all that a student learned over a semester?

### Aligned

Effective assessment is always aligned with goals, objectives, and instruction. This principle may sound like common sense, however, oftentimes assessments are not aligned. They may be a general match to the overall topic, but with an in-depth analysis of the goals and objectives, the mismatch becomes clear.

It’s also important to align with your instructional procedures. What do I mean? I observed a teacher during a lesson focused on a series of detailed facts. Much of the lesson was rote learning, and it was clear students were expected to know the minute details of the information. The next day, students were given a test. Rather than asking students to recall the facts, the essay test required a deep analysis of issues, which included the need to bring in outside

information for current applications. The assessment was rigorous, but it wasn’t aligned to the instructional focus and procedures. Based on the lesson, students thought they needed to memorize isolated facts, yet the assessment went much further. We must ensure we use instructional procedures that match our assessment expectations.

### Developmentally Appropriate

Next, effective assessment is developmentally appropriate. Too often, we use measures that are not matched to our students’ developmental levels. For example I was in a first grade classroom where students were reading about Rosa Parks. The read aloud was appropriate, but the questioning (informal assessment) was not. One of the questions related to the concept of lynching. In this case, although the assignment is rigorous in terms of higher level questions, it is far too adult for the first graders. As a part of developmental appropriateness, we must also address authenticity. When assessments seem contrived, they are not as effective. Let’s look at this example for middle school students:

#### Sample Assignment

Solve a set of computational problems related to proportions, geometrical shapes and rotations.

Notice how the task is not an authentic situation for young adolescents. The rigor and authenticity would be improved if we reframed the assignment.

#### Revised Assignment

Choose a topic you are interested in, such as skateboarding. Create either a PowerPoint, blog or video about the relationship between your topic and math. Include at least three examples.

## Quality

Effective assessment is also quality-driven. In the case of assessment, this means your task, test, project or other type of assessment is free from errors, is valid and reliable.

## Free from Errors

Let's begin with the concept of error in assessments. There are two types of errors that can occur. First are systematic errors, which usually occur unintentionally. They can also generally be avoided. Christopher Gareis and Leslie Grant in *Teacher-Made Assessments: How to Connect Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Learning*, provide examples of systematic error (see table below).

The second type of error is random error, which is unpredictable. Because of this, it can rarely be controlled. Once again, Gareis and Grant provide examples (see table below).

## Validity

Validity is another critical aspect of the quality of your assessments. Validity is the appropriateness of the assessment. It answers the question, "Does it assess what it is intended to?" The foundation of validity is the supposition that validity hinges on someone rendering

judgments, making decisions or drawing inferences based on the results of an assessment (Stiggins, & Conklin, 1992). In other words, a more accurate definition of validity is the extent to which inferences drawn from assessment results are appropriate (Gareis & Grant, 2015). If you have an accurate inference about the assessment results, it is valid. If it is an inaccurate inference, then it is not valid.

There are three types of validity. Construct validity, or face validity, is when something appears to be valid. Usually, you need content expertise to determine face validity. Content validity is how well the assessment matches the instructional objectives and learning outcomes it purports to assess. Finally, concurrent validity measures how effectively the assessment matches another assessment that is measuring the same outcomes.

## Reliability

Finally, quality-driven assignments are reliable. Reliability addresses the consistency and stability across assessments. In other words, if you give multiple assessments designed to measure the same objectives or learning outcomes, are the results

steady? Are they dependable? They are if your assessment is reliable.

## Involves Students

Student involvement is key to effective assessment. If assessments are totally teacher-driven, you won't see the best results. First, assessments should be developed in part based on what you know about your students. If you believe they have already mastered the content, the assessment should reflect that. You would create a project, test or task in which they have to apply the content to a new situation. If they are still learning the content, you may use a formative assessment to gauge where they are in the learning process. Knowledge of student learning is critical to developing effective assessments.

Students may also be involved by helping create assessments. When I gave tests to my students, one of the ways I reviewed was to have them come up with questions about the content. Then, we discussed the questions and answers. I often used those questions on the test. Many times, they were more rigorous than what I would have created! I also believe students should help develop rubrics for tasks. As you guide

### Examples of Systematic Error

- Culturally biased language, idioms and references
- Developmentally inappropriate reading level
- Mechanical or grammatical mistakes in assessment items
- Insufficient or unclear directions
- Poor layout of the assessment, causing uncertainty or mistakes in reading the assessment
- Insufficient number of assessment items
- Subjective scoring
- Cheating

### Examples of Random Error

- Illness
- Carelessness
- Unhappiness
- Momentary distractedness
- Giddiness
- Fire Alarm
- Poor night's rest
- Intercom announcement
- Wobbly desk

them through the development process, they learn the expectations of the assignment. I've heard many students say, "After we built our rubric, I finally know what I'm supposed to do."

Another way students are involved relates to the informative nature of effective assessments. As I mentioned earlier, the best assessments inform you about learning, and then transform the teaching and learning process. That is part of student involvement. What happens with the student is what provides information to you, so you can take the next instructional steps. If we don't focus on how students perform on assessments, and instead, only focus on the task, we have lost the effectiveness of the assessment.

John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning*, synthesized more than 800 meta-studies related to students, teachers, home, curricula, and teaching and learning approaches that impact classroom effectiveness. Based on the studies, he ranked which strategies make the most difference in terms of student achievement in terms of effect size. The average size, or hinge point, is .40. The higher the effect size, the more impact on student achievement. Self-reporting of grades, another way for students to be involved, is at the top of the list with a 1.44 effect size. It is the most powerful way to positively impact student achievement, and it happens with their involvement.

### Results are Effectively Communicated

Finally, with effective assessment, the results are effectively communicated to the teacher, the students, and the parents or families. When you develop an assessment, be sure it will provide the information you need

about student learning. If, in a test, it's just a series of questions, will the results communicate to you what students do and do not understand? One way to create tests is to use three levels. Include some questions that are appropriately challenging to the content, then add some basic review questions, and some that are above the level you taught. By looking at which questions students were able to answer, you can better determine if they are still in the review stage, have mastered the content or have gone beyond the content for new applications.

Results should also be communicated to students in ways they can understand and use. A simple grade on a project usually isn't enough. Whether I earn an A or a C, how do I know what that means? What did I do well? How could I improve? In this example, it's better to provide specific feedback as to what the grade actually means.

Feedback is one of the most important aspects of assessment. Returning to John Hattie's work on effect sizes, feedback receives a .73, which means it is an effective way to positively impact student learning and achievement. For now, know that without appropriate feedback, your assessments lose their effectiveness.

Communicating results to parents and family members is also important. The home environment, which is also cited by Hattie as a lower effect size, but still a factor in learning, matters. Although we cannot change the environment of the home, we can impact how parents and families respond to and support educational efforts. I've found most parents, regardless of background, want their children to be successful. However, they

sometimes don't know how to help, and they are sometimes apprehensive of school personnel, many times due to their own bad experiences in school. When we can effectively share what students are doing, how they are learning, and what they still need to know, parents and families can become very supportive. Part of communicating results is also sharing specific strategies with them so they can help. I've met many parents and family members who have told me that they don't know what their child can do, and they don't know how to help him or her become a stronger learner.

### Conclusion

Instructional rigor is a critical aspect of improving student learning and achievement. Assessment is part of rigor. If we ask students to demonstrate learning at a high level, the assessments we use must be of high quality.

*Learn more from Dr. Blackburn during the November 1 Lunch & Learn webinar "Rigor in Assessment." Visit [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org).*



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# Creating Urgency for Change

by Ronald Williamson, EdD

Talk with almost any school principal and you get a sense there's a need to improve their school. Changes may involve instructional practices to improve student learning, the culture of the school or strengthening engagement with the school community.

Over the past 50 years a lot has been written about the need to accelerate school reform and to improve schools and student learning. But there remains a fair amount of complacency about the pace of change or even the need for change. The lack of resources, changing student demographics or resistant teachers is often seen as inhibiting change. Too many principals don't convey a sense of urgency about the need to make changes at their school.

## Create Urgency

The need for change will not subside. If anything, demands for change will accelerate. Creating a sense of urgency is one way school leaders alert their employees, families and students that change will occur. Leaders can do so by following four approaches designed to create a compelling need for urgency. They can act in ways that demonstrate why change is valuable and why the status quo may be a dangerous place to remain. In other words, leaders create a narrative about why it is not in their best interests for the school to remain the same.

Creating urgency is as much an emotional response, a set of feelings, as an academic exercise (Kotter, 2008). Not only does a leader need to engage the minds of employees, they must also connect with their heart. When employees

and other stakeholders "feel" a connection to the proposed change, they are far more likely to engage in behaviors that propel the change toward implementation.

Perhaps the best-known advocate of urgency is John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and author of *Leading Change* (2012) and *A Sense of Urgency* (2008). Kotter described four strategies leaders can use to address the lack of urgency in their organization. Those approaches suggest a path for school leaders to create urgency for authentic change in their school.

## Strategy 1: Break Down Barriers to the Outside

Most organizations are internally oriented. They focus most of their energy on sustaining their current programs and practices, promoting people to new positions from within, talking most frequently with one another, relying on others in the organization for professional development, and resisting the idea those outside the organization can, in any way, inform their work. This internal focus supports complacency and is a barrier to change.

Continuing to do things the way they've always been done is exactly what happens in many organizations. They continue to focus on sustaining what they're already doing when they need to look outside the organization for insight into emerging issues and trends, as well as strategies to deal with those issues.

Schools are not immune from this complacency. Schools where most students are successful see

little incentive for change. Those that are less successful choose to blame external factors like students, families or society rather than look at their own practices.

So, what does a school leader do? How do you respond?

## Recognize the Problem of Relying on an Internal Focus

Relying primarily on an internal focus means your school can miss opportunities for growth. It also means you may encounter hazards that will undermine your current program. Here's what you can do:

- Read widely from a variety of sources and gain insight into emerging social, economic and demographic trends. Most importantly read about trends with which you may disagree. Whether you like them or not, they will impact your school.
- Share what you've read and information you've learned with employees and others in your school and district. Talk about the issues but focus on the possibilities not the threats. This will lessen the gap between inside and outside.

## Listen to Employees and Families

Create an opportunity for a candid conversation with employees and families who send their children to your school. Focus on listening and be authentic in your response.

- Hold a series of focus groups or town hall meetings where you listen to what's working and what is not working. Occasionally this can be a tough conversation but it is vital you demonstrate your willingness to hear both the good and the bad about your school.

Take thorough notes and use them to develop a plan of action.

- Be respectful of employees and families. It's hard to engage either group when they feel distrusted or disrespected. Be candid and honest in all interactions.

### **Share Uncomfortable or Troubling Data**

When you see troubling data about your school or you learn uncomfortable information, be prepared to share it. Don't shield employees from this information or it will re-enforce complacency.

- Meet regularly with your school improvement team to share information, both good and bad, about your school. Strive for open, honest discussion of the issues with an emphasis on what you can learn. Never blame the data or those who provided it.

### **Send People Out and Bring People In**

Kotter suggests you send "scouts" out to visit other organizations and learn about what is going on.

- Send teachers and other employees to conferences to learn about new trends and to visit schools that have implemented some of the innovations. Expect them to return and offer an honest assessment of what they learned.
- Bring in an outside expert or a team of teachers from an innovative school to talk about the issues and to share what they've done. Be explicit about what you want the outsiders to share but don't limit the information to only benefits of any initiative. Every innovation has costs as well as benefits. Talk candidly about both.

### **Strategy 2: Act with Urgency Every Day**

It's always been true what leaders pay attention to becomes important. Leaders are role models and employees, families and students all

note what the leader talks about and how the leader behaves.

### **Respond Quickly**

When you respond quickly you don't make hasty decisions or act in less thoughtful ways. Rather, you are clear about your priorities and you respond quickly with a well thought out plan of action.

- Be clear about your priorities and respond quickly to issues related to those priorities. Don't be hasty but be prompt. A quick response demonstrates the importance of the topic or the issue.
- In meetings, emails and in casual conversation in the hallway talk about your priorities, ask questions about what is happening in classrooms and use every interaction as an opportunity to signal what's important.
- If you're attending a meeting about one of your priorities, make active engagement a priority. Avoid interruptions and avoid leaving before the meeting is complete. Never end the meeting without being clear about whom will do what and how quickly the tasks will be completed.

### **Stop Doing Things that Aren't Urgent**

Every school falls into the trap of doing things the way they've been done in the past. It might be replicating last year's schedule, organizing meetings the same way or engaging families the same way from year to year. Occasionally those behaviors telegraph messages about complacency. So, change some of those "un-urgent" behaviors.

- Change the organization of meetings and other routine activities. Modify the agenda. Insist cell phones and tablets be turned off. Find ways to gather input from all and listen to the voices of every participant.
- Take control of your calendar. Purge low-priority items and

projects. Delegate to assistants or teacher leaders. Create time to read and think deeply about the issues. Avoid unnecessary meetings but increase the time you visit classrooms and other places where students and teachers hang out. Talk with them but more importantly, listen to what is being discussed.

### **Be Visibly Urgent**

Because people pay attention to the leader, their behavior and their priorities, it is critical that you be visible and clearly demonstrate urgency.

- Be visible and accessible throughout the school day. In addition to being seen, you also want to talk with teachers, other employees, students and families. Use every opportunity to talk about your vision for your school, your initiatives and how they positively improve the experience of students.
- Talk with passion about your school and the initiatives you propose. Be relentless in talking about the need to move, adapt and respond to changing conditions. Talk with feeling and identify examples of how these initiatives impact students and their learning.

### **Strategy 3: Embrace Crises**

Too often people see a crisis as harmful with negative implications on their school or organization. And that can be true. Leaders often try to avoid crises. But a crisis can also provide an opportunity to reexamine practices, to commit to new approaches and to adapt the school to a new reality.

### **Use a Crisis to Create Urgency**

After any crisis the leader must take time to reflect and focus on what you and your school learned. Use that reflection to engage employees and families in examining your core

beliefs and values, and identifying ways to respond that don't threaten those values but rather reinforce their importance. Be mindful a crisis doesn't guarantee greater urgency. It may simply lead to greater reliance on past practice.

### Create a Crisis

Only partially in jest do I suggest creating a crisis. And I don't mean anything that might threaten your organization or harm individuals. But if urgency doesn't emerge, you want to develop a strategy and act. Priority should always be on engaging employees and families in your initiative. But, you simply can't allow your school to fail to act. Use data to shape the crisis or set expectations for individuals so they are forced to respond. Just be clear that manufactured crises must be about "real" problems not used to distract from "real" issues or tough personnel issues.

### Strategy 4: Deal with Naysayers

Every school has naysayers. They may be teachers or other employees, families, influential community members or even members of the administrative team. While

they can't be ignored neither can they be allowed to dominate the conversation or inhibit change. Don't confuse a naysayer with a skeptic. Skeptics ask questions, respond to data logically, and often seek additional information. While skeptics can be annoying and slow down decision making, naysayers don't appreciate data or information, and often suggest that no action is needed. They value the status quo.

### Don't Waste Time Co-Opting a Naysayer

Naysayers want to stop action and destroy urgency. Because of their tendency to disrupt conversation and delay action, it is best to avoid wasting resources on trying to co-opt them. They are often not inclined to listen to others and won't accept decisions by others. Avoid their involvement in study groups and other activities designed to create urgency.

### Never Ignore a Naysayer

On the other hand you can't ignore them either. If ignored, a naysayer can continue to create mischief. They are adept at raising questions that have an element of truth or overstating the problems. They often organize an active resistance, sometimes covertly, and sow dissension among members of the school community.

### Distract the Naysayers

If you can't ignore them and you can't co-opt them what do you do? Kotter (2008) suggests you distract them and he provides three suggestions. First, find a special assignment or task for your naysayer. Ideally, that assignment will take them away from the work on your initiative. Second, pair them with someone who understands their job is to keep the naysayer distracted. Third, give

them so much work that there is little time to create disruption and dissension. They still may find ways to be disruptive but that disruption will be minimized.

### Get Rid of Them

We're not suggesting you simply fire, demote or force someone into retirement. But, on the other hand, you need to be clear about expectations for employees and be honest about how their behavior impacts your school. Don't exaggerate on evaluations and other assessments but be honest in how you measure their performance. Many teacher evaluation protocols now include expectations about collaboration and participation in school improvement planning.

### Immobilize Using Social Pressure

In most schools everyone knows who the naysayers are and understands how they disrupt efforts for improvement. Find socially acceptable ways to identify the naysayers in public and let social pressure do the rest.

### Final Thoughts

A sense of urgency is often needed to accelerate change and improvement in schools. Urgency is not created by a single event, or through a single conversation or presentation. Rather, urgency emerges when there is a systematic approach by the school leader to modify the culture of their school. It starts with the leader and the way the leader spends time, the things they talk about, and the priorities they set.

### References

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# Dyslexia: Why Some Smart Kids Can't Read

by Robbi Cooper and Clee Upchurch, MEd

Learning to read is an important skill which greatly impacts college and career success. By definition, dyslexics typically have average to above-average intelligence. Some of our brightest minds and innovators are dyslexic, for instance Charles Schwab and Richard Branson. Yet, like many dyslexic students in today's classrooms, they were not viewed as promising students.

Dyslexic students arrive in our kindergarten and first grade classrooms with healthy brains ready to learn. These students may seem perfectly typical but they are neurologically less equipped to adapt to learn to read. This is because networks in the brain needed to adapt to reading are not as well developed and available to them as typical students.

We know this because of advances in brain-imaging technology, paid for by the National Institutes of Health. These new tools have dramatically changed what we know about learning to read. The mystery of why some smart kids struggle to learn to read is colorfully examined using fMRI and other brain-imaging technology. The brain has areas of designated cells that are ready to help process vision, sound, memory and other natural human behavior. There is even an area in the frontal lobe designed to organize and integrate ideas. These are just a few of the remarkable neurobiological

processes that make us human. The dyslexic brain shows differences and these differences shed light on the struggles of students with dyslexia in our classrooms.

Gaining knowledge from print and a variety of sources is vital to academic and personal growth. The student who reads easily is no more intelligent than the student who struggles to read. Yet reading ability can set a child on a course for success or failure. It can, but it does not have to.

According to Dr. Sally Shaywitz of Yale, dyslexia affects approximately 10-20% of the population. In Texas, that is approximately one million students! That means there are close to four dyslexic students in every single K-12 grade class in every school.

Some eye-opening statistics:

- According to the Texas Dyslexia Handbook, 75% of students who do not have intervention before the age of eight will have reading difficulties into high school.
- According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 35% of dyslexics who do not receive intervention drop out of school.
- A comprehensive study conducted in 1999 by The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), to determine

the prevalence of dyslexia in the prison population, found 47.8% of the Texas inmate sample scored below the twenty-fifth percentile.

With this knowledge, how can schools best ensure students with dyslexia are supported and their potential tapped? Educators, specifically principals, are key to guiding campuses to successfully support dyslexic learners by setting these priorities:

- Campus-wide awareness about dyslexia
- Early identification (as early as kindergarten/first grade)
- Early intervention (as early as kindergarten/first grade)
- In-classroom support such as integrating Universal Design for Learning

## Campus-Wide Awareness

Principals set the tone for supporting dyslexic learners on campus. It is important to be aware and proactive about dyslexia. All school staff should understand the signs of dyslexia and share warning signs with parents.

Creating an inclusive culture where having a learning difference, such as dyslexia, is understood and valued is key to the success of students. Dyslexics have many strengths which should be celebrated and supported, but which may be negatively impacted

by their reading ability. Keeping self esteem high is important for dyslexic students to become successful learners. Find ways to let them shine.

instruction and during instruction with structured intervention, is life changing for students with dyslexia.

“sight” words and following printed directions

- Slow processing when listening, following directions or playing games
- Mixes up the order of letters (mazine/magazine)
- Is not interested in reading books

## “Principals set the tone for supporting dyslexic learners on campus. It is important to be aware and proactive about dyslexia.”

Two main indicators of dyslexia in young children are poor phonemic awareness and poor rapid-naming skills.

What dyslexia

may look like in pre-kindergarten:

- Late learning to talk or slow to learn new words
- Poor auditory memory for nursery rhymes and chants
- Aversion to print (Doesn't enjoy following along if book is read aloud.)
- Trouble producing speech sounds
- Avoids letters or confuses them
- Inability to recall the right word

### Early Identification

When a dyslexic learner is identified and supported, positive effects for them and their teachers prevail. For generations a wait-to-fail model has been used to address struggling readers, this can lead to frustrated students, parents and teachers. The wait-to-fail model can create additional behavior challenges. If a student is not “getting it,” a plan of action should be created to address the failure.

The brain pathways used for effective reading can be improved by implementing early, intensive, direct, and explicit instruction. Every student is better at reading with direct instruction, but building the pre-reading network before

What to look for in kindergarten and first grade:

- Trouble learning phonics (sounds of letters)
- Speaks like a younger child (aminal for animal)
- Has trouble remembering

A great Texas resource for learning more about early identification of dyslexia is the *Texas Dyslexia Handbook* (<http://tea.texas.gov/academics/dyslexia/>).

### Early Intervention

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), 95% of students who have trouble learning to read can reach grade level if they receive specialized help early. Kindergarten and first grade are the “window of opportunity” to prevent long-term reading problems. Without early intervention, the “reading gap” between struggling readers and their peers continues to widen over time.

Early and ongoing interventions must be based on best practices described in the *Texas Dyslexia Handbook*. Interventions for students with dyslexia are also best practices for all struggling readers.

### Resources

- Decoding Dyslexia - <http://www.decodingdyslexia.net/>
- International Dyslexia Association - <https://dyslexiaida.org/>
- Texas Dyslexia Handbook - <http://tea.texas.gov/academics/dyslexia/>
- Understood.org - <https://www.understood.org/en>
- Bookshare - <https://www.bookshare.org/cms/>
- Learning Ally - <https://www.learningally.org/>
- CAST Universal Design for Learning - <http://www.cast.org>

# TEPSA

## Instructional Leader

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*Instructional Leader* is published every other month by the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association, 501 East 10<sup>th</sup> St, Austin, Texas 78701. Telephone: 512-478-5268 1-800-252-3621

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The earlier intervention takes place, the better the outcome.

Campuses should have a Certified Academic Learning Therapist (CALT) or other highly-trained dyslexia therapist on staff to provide intervention and support

to classroom teachers. CALTs are trained in delivering the multisensory instruction that works effectively with dyslexic students who come to school ready and eager to learn.

### Classroom Support

In a positive and encouraging classroom environment, a dyslexic student will experience the feeling of success and self value. Dyslexics have many strengths and although each is different, oral skills, comprehension, good visual spatial awareness and artistic abilities along with math and science aptitudes should be fostered. More and more dyslexic students will become talented and gifted members of our schools if we work not only with their specific areas of difficulty, but also their specific areas of strengths from an early age. To do this we have to let go of the viewpoint that a dyslexic student must first fail in order to be identified and more importantly that reading ability is tied to intelligence.

Teachers in classrooms with dyslexic students need to be flexible in their approaches and find methods that work with their dyslexic students. Universal

**“Interventions for dyslexics are also best practices for all struggling readers. The earlier intervention takes place, the better the outcome.”**

Design for Learning has many guide posts to support effective classroom models. Above all, there must be an understanding that dyslexic students have many talents and skills. Their abilities must not be measured purely on the basis of their difficulties in acquiring literacy skills. Dyslexic students, like all students, thrive on challenges and successes.

Take active steps to support their strengths by:

- Allowing dyslexic students access to Bookshare and Learning Ally accounts. These audiobooks are free to dyslexic students both under 504 and SPED in Texas. While dyslexic students are learning skills which will allow them to read independently, audiobooks allow them a safe, supportive reading experience, reinforcing a love of literature and building needed vocabulary and critical thinking skills alongside their peers.
- Addressing the emotional impact of dyslexia by

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## Dyslexia: Why Some Smart Kids Can't Read

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identifying struggling readers in each class and making an effort to speak to them. A teacher can make a big impact by communicating that a dyslexic student is bright and that the teacher believes in him/her.

- Finding out what their interests and talents are and making sure they feel special about something. Celebrate them and let them know you care. Encourage your staff to do the same.

Differences that make us all unique must be valued and supported.

Dyslexic students have many gifts. These gifts must not go untapped simply because they are buried in struggles to learn to read. When their learning challenges are addressed, they excel in school and life and undoubtedly will enrich your campus with their remarkable perspectives.

How are you going to help change the life of a dyslexic student?

*Learn more from Robbi and Clee during the December 6 Lunch & Learn webinar "Decoding Dyslexia." Visit [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org).*



### Authors

Robbi Cooper is a parent of a dyslexic and dysgraphic son served through Special Education. Robbi is a state leader for Decoding Dyslexia Texas, whose mission is to Educate, Advocate and Legislate, and provide parents and educators resources to support best practices so dyslexic students reach their full potential.

Clee Upchurch, MEd, is mom to two kids, one who is a bright dyslexic learner. Clee is a strong advocate for dyslexia and an active member of Decoding Dyslexia Texas. Her professional experience includes more than 15 years in public education and more than six years in the business industry.