



You Asked!

Q27: I understand phonics instruction is critical for students with dyslexia to learn to read and spell. How do I know if a school is teaching phonics effectively?

A: Research supports phonics instruction that is systematic and explicit. When we talk about phonics, these two words are key. Systematic and explicit phonics is the type of phonics instruction found to be most effective by the [National Reading Panel report on teaching children to read](#) (here is a [summary](#) of the National Reading Panel report entitled “Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read”).

By way of background, in 1997, Congress asked the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to work with the U.S. Department of Education in establishing a National Reading Panel that would evaluate existing research and evidence to find the best ways of teaching children to read. After reviewing relevant research available on how children learn to read, the experts on the National Reading Panel determined the most effective evidence-based methods for teaching children to read and issued the National Reading Panel report in 2000.

The findings of this meta-analysis by the NRP are so strong, they have influenced federal and state education policy. For example, at the state level, [California Education Code Section 60200.4](#) requires the California curriculum framework as well as instructional materials adopted by the State Board of Education to include systematic and explicit phonics. [Current reading research](#) continues to support the NRP findings with respect to phonics instruction.

Most recently, the International Literacy Association (ILA) published this [Literacy Leadership Brief: Meeting the Challenges of Early Phonics Instruction](#), which takes a strong stance in favor of systematic and explicit phonics. This position paper is significant as ILA is a large association (with more than 300,000 members) and ILA had previously been more closely aligned to “balanced literacy” practices based on historical briefs and positions. The fact that ILA is now conforming to the position supported by the National Reading Panel report findings, [federal](#) and [California](#) education law, and official positions by the [International Dyslexia Association](#), [California Association of School Psychologists](#), [CDE California Dyslexia Guidelines](#) and Decoding Dyslexia CA that systematic and explicit phonics instruction will benefit all students, not just those with dyslexia, is encouraging.

What is systematic and explicit phonics instruction?

In its recently issued brief, the International Literacy Association describes systematic and explicit as follows:

Being systematic means that we follow a continuum from easy to more complex skills, slowly introducing each new skill. Systematic instruction includes a review and repetition cycle to achieve mastery and goes from the known to the new in a way that makes the new learning more obvious and easier for students to grasp. . .

Explicit means that the initial introduction of a letter–sound relationship, or phonics skill, is directly stated to students. (ILA, 2019, p. 3)

Unfortunately, despite the strong evidence and policy supporting systematic and explicit phonics, many schools across California fail to deliver this type of instruction. With the common “balanced literacy” approach, phonics instruction is deemphasized, as students are expected to learn to read not by focusing on the sounds, letter patterns, and how written words work, but rather through lots of independent practice reading leveled books. In the *Education Week* article dated July 18, 2019, ["Influential Reading Group Makes It Clear: Students Need Systematic, Explicit Phonics"](#), author Stephen Sawchuck explains:

This is why the ILA's word choice "systematic and explicit" matters so much. In balanced literacy, while there can be a phonics component, it's often limited or incomplete, such as focusing on initial letter sounds ("b" as in baseball, bat, brick). But students may not get exposed to each of the sound-letter patterns in turn, or get enough practice to master them. (Sawchuck, 2019)

Most classrooms incorporate some level of phonics teaching, but when it is not systematic and explicit, it is often taught randomly, indirectly and without the practice and repetition many students, especially those with dyslexia, need to learn to read (See ["Whole-Language High Jinks: How to Tell When "Scientifically-Based Reading Instruction" Isn't"](#)).

In the January/February 2019 issue of *Teaching Exceptional Children* in an article entitled, [Structured Literacy and Typical Literacy Practices: Understanding Differences to Create Instructional Opportunities](#), author Louise Spear-Swerling examines how many classrooms fail to include the instruction crucial for students with dyslexia. In this article, she identifies popular authors and programs that are widely used in schools, but neglectful in their approach to phonics instruction.

Examples of Non-Structured Literacy Approaches	
<i>Guided Reading</i> (e.g., Burkins & Croft, 2010)	<i>Four Blocks Literacy</i> (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999)
<i>Reader's Workshop</i> (e.g., Calkins, 2000)	<i>Reading Recovery</i> (Clay, 1994)
<i>Balanced Literacy</i>	<i>Leveled Literacy Intervention</i> (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009)

Table excerpted from Spear-Swerling, 2018, p. 203. This list is not exhaustive.

Systematic and explicit phonics is a critical part of reading instruction for students with dyslexia. As stated by the International Literacy Association:

Phonics instruction is an essential part of early reading and writing instruction. Students need to learn how to efficiently decode words to increase their word recognition skills. The more words students recognize automatically, the better their reading fluency, which has a powerful effect on their comprehension of text. And that's the point. Phonics instruction is designed to increase students' ability to read and make meaning from text. However, it needs to be done in a way that is most effective and efficient. It is paramount that teachers and creators of curriculum materials take an objective and thorough look at how we improve that instruction to maximize student learning. (ILA, 2019, p. 8)

Please remember that, while systematic and explicit instruction in phonics is crucial, it is just one part of the instruction students need to become readers. Students also need evidence-based instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. While all students benefit from explicit instruction in these areas, students with dyslexia likely won't achieve literacy without it.

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