

# California lags behind in helping kids with dyslexia, new bill looks to fix that

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California, a state that prides itself on being a leader and innovator, is far behind in addressing the most common learning disability in children: dyslexia.

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## What You Need To Know

- SB 691 would require all California schools to screen for dyslexia
- The timeframe between birth and age 8 is a critical period for literacy development
- It takes four times as long to help with reading with a fourth grader as it does with a kindergartner
- Sen. Anthony Portantino authored a similar bill last year, but it failed to make it out of the Assembly Education Committee

California is one of 10 states in the nation that does not mandate any kind of statewide dyslexia screening for students.

The first statewide test in California that gives any indication on students' reading ability is the STAR test. However, Megan Potente, Co-Director of the advocacy group Decoding Dyslexia, says valuable time has already been lost in helping students.

“The years before age eight are the optimal years for literacy development. And in California, the first required testing happens at the end of third grade. So it’s very possible that parents only learn that their children are struggling when they get that report in the summer before fourth grade,” Potente said.

Right now, it’s mainly on parents to realize their child might need help. Such was the case for Rachel Del Carlo-Levy and her son Dominic Levy, who was identified with dyslexia at a young age.

“I remember there was this assignment where we had to read and answer questions and that was so hard for me, but other kids in my class liked it — they were like oh it’s so fun,” Dominic explained.

His mom also deals with dyslexia and was determined to get him intervention early to prevent the struggles she went through in school.

“The teachers will say ‘Oh, he’s fine. He’s just a little bit behind. Kids all learn at different levels.’ But, my gut was that I knew something was wrong, so I had to learn how to navigate the system on my own,” Del Carlo-Levy said.

While he got intervention early, Levy made real progress when he started working with an educational therapist in the seventh grade.

“I realized I wasn’t bad at math. I just wasn’t taught the way I learned. Once I learned math from an education therapist, I’m really good at math and I like math,” he adds.

The sophomore high school student believes every child in California deserves the proper help with overcoming dyslexia.

“I just find it sad when kids don’t get the intervention they need and they can’t do the things they love like sports because they get benched because of their grades,” Dominic shared.

Studies show it takes four times longer to intervene and helps kids learn to read in 4th grade than it does when they are in kindergarten.

State Senator Anthony Portantino, D-Burbank, introduced SB 691, which would require a statewide screening for kindergarten through second grade, to help California catch up to the rest of the country.

The bill requires schools to conduct a yearly screening using an evidence-based screener approved by the California State Board of Education.

The bill would also require schools to establish procedures to intervene and help kids who have been identified as at-risk for dyslexia.

“We know it’s cheaper to intervene earlier and we know it’s easier. It’s much easier to help a first grader than an eighth grader with a reading problem,” Portantino said.

Last year, Portantino authored a similar bill, SB 237, which failed to make it out of the Assembly Education Committee.

The California Teachers Association (CTA) also opposed SB 237.

A spokesperson for the CTA said the bill would have led to students being over identified for dyslexia, specifically students who are English learners.

The CTA has not taken an official position on SB 691 yet.

“I’m determined to get it through the system. Every first grade class we don’t help is a first grade class we don’t help and you never get the first grade back. I’m really, really determined to get it through the system this time,” Portantino said.

What makes this year different is there is a new chair of the Education Committee, who Portantino believes will allow it to be heard by the committee.

The bill has bipartisan support with over 30 lawmakers signing on as co-authors.

“I’m optimistic that this chair will actually put the best interest of kids at the forefront of that decision,” Portantino said.

Dyslexia is a personal issue for Portantino, who found out he had a learning disability when he was in the eighth grade.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has also been open about his struggles with dyslexia. He shared how the learning disability affected him at school during his swearing-in ceremony earlier this year.

“I couldn’t read and I was looking for any way to ditch classes. I’d fake stomach aches and dizziness,” Newsom said.