



Policy Memorandum

Regarding Structural Placement and Definition of Dyslexia in the 21st Century Dyslexia Act

To: Senate HELP Committee Staff / House Education & Workforce Committee Staff

From: Fernette Eide, M.D., CEO, Dyslexic advantage

Re: Preserving Dyslexia Within the SLD Framework and Retaining “Unexpected Difficulty”

Date: February 24, 2026

Purpose

This memorandum supports explicit federal recognition of dyslexia under IDEA while respectfully urging caution about creating dyslexia as a standalone disability category separate from Specific Learning Disability (SLD). It also recommends preserving the term “unexpected difficulty” in the statutory definition, with clarification that the term does not require rigid IQ–achievement discrepancy formulas.

Explicit recognition can strengthen services. Structural separation, however, may unintentionally narrow the educational understanding of dyslexia.

Current Structure Under IDEA

Under current law, dyslexia is included within the Specific Learning Disability category. This placement reflects an important conceptual framework: SLD recognizes unexpected academic difficulty in a specific domain relative to age, instruction, and broader learning capacity.



That structure acknowledges uneven development. It situates reading disability within a neurodevelopmental profile rather than defining it solely by low performance.

Concerns About Creating a Separate Category

Creating dyslexia as a standalone IDEA category may carry unintended consequences:

- It risks detaching dyslexia from the broader SLD framework that recognizes uneven development across domains.
- It may encourage a performance-based interpretation focused primarily on low reading scores rather than underlying neurocognitive processing differences.
- It could reduce attention to co-occurring learning needs that frequently accompany reading disabilities.
- It may inadvertently shift identification toward a narrower, outcome-based label rather than a developmental profile.

The concern is not about naming dyslexia explicitly. The concern is about structural drift: redefining dyslexia as reading failure alone rather than as a specific learning disability embedded in a broader developmental context.

Research Context

The studies most frequently cited to argue that “IQ doesn’t matter” include Vellutino et al. (2000), Stuebing et al. (2002), Fletcher et al. (2007), and related work. Their shared and important finding is that IQ–achievement discrepancy status does not reliably distinguish which early-grade poor readers will respond to structured decoding instruction.



A later meta-analysis (Stuebing et al., 2009) found that once baseline reading is accounted for, IQ contributes only a small amount of variance in short-term intervention response.

These findings support eliminating rigid discrepancy formulas as gatekeepers for services.

However, the scope of these studies is limited:

- Samples were primarily kindergarten through early elementary.
- Outcomes focused largely on decoding, fluency, and standardized comprehension measures.
- The studies did not evaluate long-term academic development, upper-grade content learning, written composition, or the educational consequences of uneven cognitive profiles across adolescence.

The research addresses prediction of early intervention response. It does not test whether dyslexia reflects uneven development across domains of learning.

Why Preserving “Unexpected Difficulty” Matters

Historically, “unexpected difficulty” signaled that severe word-level reading challenges could coexist with intact or strong reasoning and language comprehension. That recognition has protected capable students from being mischaracterized as globally limited when reading output lagged.



Preserving the term does not require reinstating IQ cutoffs. It preserves the developmental understanding that dyslexia can represent a specific print-processing bottleneck within an otherwise capable learner.

Removing “unexpected” — or redefining dyslexia solely as low reading performance — risks flattening this distinction.

Legal Considerations Under IDEA

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017) clarified that students are entitled to an educational program reasonably calculated to enable progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances.

For a student whose reasoning and language abilities exceed their word-level reading skills, understanding that uneven profile is essential to determining what “appropriate progress” requires. If dyslexia is defined solely by low reading scores without reference to developmental context, educational teams may underestimate what ambitious and appropriate progress looks like for that learner.

Preserving both the SLD framework and the concept of unexpected difficulty supports IDEA’s substantive standard.

Recommendations

1. Retain dyslexia within the Specific Learning Disability category rather than creating a separate IDEA disability classification.
2. Preserve the phrase “unexpected difficulty” in the statutory definition.
3. Clarify that “unexpected” does not mandate rigid IQ–achievement discrepancy formulas.



4. Distinguish between eligibility mechanics and developmental description in committee report language or guidance.

Conclusion

The goal of improving dyslexia recognition and services is widely shared. Explicit naming can advance that goal. At the same time, preserving dyslexia within the SLD framework and retaining the concept of unexpected difficulty protects the developmental integrity of the condition and reduces the risk of reducing dyslexia to a performance-based reading label.

Careful statutory language can strengthen identification without weakening the educational understanding that has historically protected capable students from underestimation.

Respectfully submitted,

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Selected References



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Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1, 580 U.S. 386 (2017).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401.