



AFC'S GUIDE TO

Reading Instruction & Dyslexia

OCTOBER 2026



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

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This guide is for families of New York City students who need more help learning to read. It provides a quick overview of the “science of reading,” explains what’s changed in New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) in recent years, answers some frequently asked questions about dyslexia, and explains how to get help if your child is struggling with reading.

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This guide does not constitute legal advice. It attempts to summarize existing policies and laws without stating the opinion of AFC. If you have a legal problem, please contact an attorney or advocate.

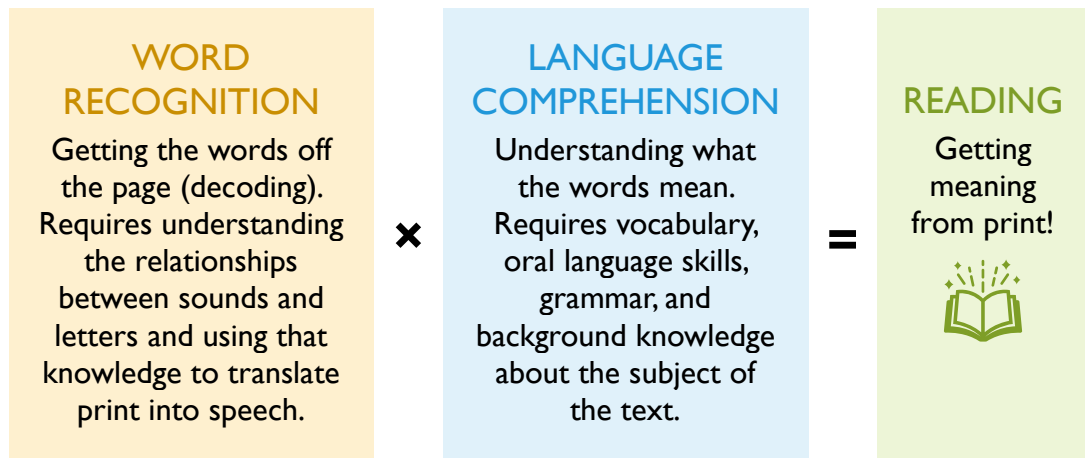
PART I.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO READ

Learning to read is not easy, and many children struggle to do so. While our brains are wired from birth for *spoken* language, **learning to read is not a natural or automatic process**. This is because *written* language is a relatively recent human invention. No part of the brain is specifically devoted to reading, which means we each have to build new connections between areas of our brains that evolved for other purposes, like speech and vision.

For some kids, this seems to happen without much effort. But the majority of children need to be *explicitly taught* how to break the code that links spoken language with print. Without the right instruction, students struggle unnecessarily and don't learn to read as well as they could. This is *especially* true for students with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia.

Reading requires both **word recognition** and **language comprehension** skills:



A student can struggle with reading because they have trouble learning how to decode; because they have trouble understanding and using language; or because they need more support developing *both* sets of skills.

What does effective reading instruction look like?

There are five essential components to reading instruction: **phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension**. Together, these five “pillars” of instruction help students build the word recognition and language comprehension skills necessary for reading.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Speaking, listening, and oral language skills are the foundation for learning to read. To break the code that links speech with print, children first need to understand that words can be broken down into smaller “chunks.” Being able to notice and use these chunks in spoken language — for example, clapping out the syllables in words and recognizing words that rhyme — is a skill called **phonological awareness**.

Phonemic awareness is a specific type of phonological awareness: the ability to hear and work with the individual sounds (called *phonemes*) that make up a spoken word. Research shows that children who have weak phonemic awareness skills have a much harder time learning how to read.

Students develop phonological and phonemic awareness through

LITERACY LINGO

A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in a spoken word that makes a difference to the word’s meaning. English has 44 phonemes, which combine to form syllables and words. For example, the word *bat* is made up of three phonemes (three sounds): /b/, /a/, and /t/, and the /t/ sound is what makes it different from the word *bag* or *ban*. The slash marks mean that we’re talking about the sound a letter makes, not the name of the letter itself.

To be able to read, children must be taught how letters represent speech sounds. This part of instruction is called **phonics**. For example, there are several spelling patterns that represent the sound /k/: K (as in *kite*), C (as in *cat*), CK (as in *duck*), CH (as in *school*), and CC (as in *account*).

activities that let them play with sounds and language. For example:

- Identifying words that start or end with the same sound.
- Making up rhymes and playing rhyming games.
- Blending sounds together into words.
- Breaking words apart into their individual sounds.
- Adding, dropping, or changing individual sounds within words to make new words.



PHONICS

Phonics instruction teaches children how to connect the sounds they hear in spoken language (phonemes) to the letters they see written down. Knowing letter-sound relationships is what lets us decode, or “sound out,” words we haven’t seen before. Phonics teaches students the letter(s) that can represent each sound. It explains the “rules” of written language and the exceptions to those rules.

Research is very clear that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction is most effective when it is *systematic* and *explicit*. This means:

- **The relationships between speech sounds and letters are taught in a logical order that is planned out ahead of time.** Each new lesson builds on what students have already learned, moving from simple and consistent letter-sound patterns to harder and more complicated ones. Students steadily build their knowledge of sounds, letters, and spelling patterns.
- **Everything is directly explained in a clear, straightforward way.** There are lessons led by the teacher where they break things down step-by-step and demonstrate skills with specific examples. Students never have to guess at what they’re supposed to know or do, and they’re not expected to “discover” the rules of language on their own. The teacher tells them what the rules are and shows them how to apply those rules to read and spell.

- **Students have lots of opportunities to practice what they’re learning in a meaningful context.** This practice includes reading sentences and stories that use the letter-sound relationships they’ve been taught. Stories written for this purpose are sometimes called “decodable texts.”
- **Students get feedback from the teacher right away as they’re practicing new skills.** Feedback is specific, so students know what they’re doing right and when they’ve made a mistake.

FLUENCY

Fluency is the ability to read easily, correctly, and with the right expression and speed. Fluent readers recognize words right away, without having to sound them out each time. When they read out loud, it sounds natural and smooth (they don’t get stuck on individual words). Fluency comes with lots of practice: reading and re-reading texts out loud.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary refers to the words we know and use. It is easier for beginning readers to sound out words that they have already heard and said many times before. A large vocabulary is important for comprehension. To understand what we read, we need to know what most of the words mean and how they can be used. Vocabulary instruction should also teach students about word structure and how to use the useful parts of words, like prefixes and suffixes, to help figure out their meaning.

COMPREHENSION

Comprehension is the ability to understand what you are reading. It means making connections between what you read and what you already know and drawing conclusions based on the text. Comprehension requires background knowledge and vocabulary, as well as the ability to understand spoken language. Teaching comprehension skills means helping students ask questions like “what’s the most important point?” and “why did things happen that way?” This is the end goal of reading — getting meaning from print!

“STRUCTURED LITERACY” vs. “BALANCED LITERACY”

Structured literacy is an approach to teaching reading that is based on a large body of research in education, neuroscience, psychology, and other fields. This research is often called the “science of reading.” In structured literacy classrooms, students learn how to break words apart into their individual sounds and are directly taught letter-sound relationships in a systematic way. Everything is clearly explained and students get lots of practice building foundational skills.

Balanced literacy is an approach to teaching reading that includes some phonics, but phonics isn’t emphasized or taught systematically. Instead of focusing on sounds and letters as the way to get unfamiliar words off the page, balanced literacy classrooms usually encourage memorization and guessing at words based on the pictures, just the first letter, or what might make sense in context. (These guessing strategies are the workarounds many struggling readers use to try to get by; they’re *not* what good readers do.) This prevents many students from building strong decoding skills.

While phonics is essential, phonics alone is not enough to learn to read! At every grade level, a school’s English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum should build students’ vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world. This means it will teach children about:

- Topics like science, history, geography, and the arts.
- The definitions of new words and the relationships between words.
- Grammar and sentence structure. For example: the parts of speech; the difference between a sentence and a fragment; how to use punctuation.
- Common text structures (like compare and contrast) and features of language (like metaphors).

What is NYC Reads?

NYC Reads is a Citywide initiative to help all students become strong readers. The goal is to strengthen literacy instruction and ensure schools are using materials and teaching practices that follow the science of reading. NYC Reads began with elementary schools in 15 of the City's 32 community school districts during the 2023–24 school year. Since then, it has gradually expanded to include *all* elementary schools, as well as some middle and high schools.

As part of this initiative, each district (including District 75, the Citywide special education district) picked one of three English Language Arts (ELA) curricula to use for core instruction in grades K–5 in all its schools. The three options are HMH Into Reading, EL Education, and Wit & Wisdom. Some schools were already using one of them before the launch of NYC Reads, but other schools had to adopt new materials and ways of teaching.

Elementary schools are also required to use a program for foundational skills instruction (phonemic awareness and phonics) in grades K–2. These are programs that provide explicit instruction in the mechanics of reading, so students learn how to get the words off the page. There are multiple approved options that schools can pick from, but the most common programs used are Wilson Foundations, Heggerty Phonemic Awareness, and Really Great Reading.

In 2025–26, NYC Reads expanded to middle schools in eight districts. Each of these districts adopted a single ELA curriculum (either EL Education or Wit & Wisdom) to use for grades 6–8 in all schools in the district. During the 2026–27 school year, middle schools in an additional 10 community school districts and District 75, as well as four high school districts, are joining the initiative. These districts are focusing on improving intervention for students who need more support in reading. See [Part III of this guide](#) to learn more about intervention.



Use the [NYC Reads Curriculum Finder tool](#) to see which English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum is used at your child's school.

What if my child is learning English as a new language?

The fundamentals of learning to read are the same whether you're learning in a language you already know or a language you're still learning to speak and understand. Students learning English as a new language need direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension — the same as their peers who are proficient in English.



Literacy instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs) must also include oral language development.

The ability to understand *spoken* English is key to being able to *read* in English. ELLs need additional instruction and support to help them learn to speak in English and understand the meaning of the words and text being used to teach them to read.



A student's home language is a resource.

Multilingualism is a strength, and teachers should build on the language skills English learners already have! This means making connections between English and a student's home language by drawing attention to similarities and differences in sounds, spelling patterns, and sentence structure.

Schools are required to provide all ELLs with English as a New Language (ENL) instruction to help them learn English. ELLs who participate in bilingual programs are *also* taught in their home language.

New York City is rolling out a new English Language Development (ELD) curriculum for stand-alone ENL in grades K–5 at a select number of schools. Stand-alone ENL is time in the school day when ELLs at the beginning stages of English language development receive targeted instruction and support in speaking, reading, and writing English. Stand-alone ENL is *in addition to* and *separate from* a student's main English Language Arts (ELA) class. The ELA class, which uses one of the three NYC Reads curricula described on [page 9](#), integrates ENL instruction.

The new ELD curriculum for stand-alone ENL is called National Geographic Learning Reach Higher, or NatGeo Reach. In the 2026–27 school year, NatGeo Reach is being used for stand-alone ENL in grades K–5 at schools in nine community school districts. Learn more on [NYC Public Schools’ website](#).

For more information on the rights of ELLs and immigrant students in New York City schools, please see [AFC’s guides and resources](#).

NOTE

Speaking a language other than English at home will NOT make it harder for your child to learn to read in English! By talking with your child and reading books written in your home language, you’re helping them develop important early literacy skills that will transfer to a new language.

When my child’s teacher says they’re reading at a certain level, what does that mean?

A reading “level” is a measure of how well a student can read and understand a text. Teachers use this information to help plan instruction and track student progress over the year. Levels can give you a general sense of how your child is doing compared to other students their age. But for students who are struggling, their reading level alone doesn’t tell you *why* they’re having trouble or the specific areas where they need extra help. See the [next section of this guide](#) for more information on how schools in New York City screen students for reading difficulties.

Schools sometimes organize books by levels to help students choose independent reading that isn’t too easy or too hard. These levels are often referred to by letters or numbers (for example, “Level D” or “600L” books). Books are sorted into levels based on things like the number of words in each sentence, how tricky the vocabulary is, and the topics covered. You can think of levels as *general guideposts* for what books your child is ready to read on their own, without much help from an adult. Levels should NOT be used to limit students’ access to challenging books or grade-level material!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Reading Rockets](#) is a great place to start if you want to learn more about the key components of reading instruction, why some students need extra help, and what families can do to support learning at home.
- The **National Institute for Literacy** publication *A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents* explains what your child should be able to do at each grade level, what to look for in their classroom, and how to support them at home. There's one booklet for [birth–preschool](#) and another for [kindergarten–grade 3](#).
- Check out YouTube playlists from the [Philadelphia Read by 4th campaign](#) and the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#) for examples of activities you can do with your child to help build their foundational literacy skills.
- The website [¡Colorín Colorado!](#) has information and resources on literacy learning specifically for families of English Language Learners.



PART II.

UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability: experts estimate that around one in every ten people is dyslexic. Dyslexia can range from mild to severe, and it has nothing to do with intelligence. **Students with dyslexia typically have problems with reading because they have trouble mastering the relationships between the sounds of spoken language and the letters that represent those sounds in print.** This means they have a hard time converting the written letters they see on the page into words they can say out loud, even though those words might be part of their spoken vocabulary. This results in difficulty being able to decode words accurately and quickly. And when you get tripped up trying to get individual words off the page, it's a lot harder to remember and understand the meaning of what you're reading.

Dyslexia is not a visual problem. It's a myth that the main symptom of dyslexia is seeing and writing letters backwards. Students with dyslexia don't see letters and words any differently than other students. In fact, it's common for young children to reverse letters (for example, mixing up *b*'s and *d*'s) when they're first learning how to read and write — on its own, this isn't a warning sign that a student has dyslexia. And some dyslexic students never reverse letters at all, so just because a child *doesn't* do this doesn't mean they *don't* have a disability, either.

Is dyslexia something my child will outgrow?

No. Dyslexia is a lifelong, neurobiological (brain-based) condition, *not* a delay in typical development. **Signs of trouble should always be taken seriously. If your child is struggling with reading, don't assume things will get better on their own.** Scientists have used brain scans to show that when someone has

dyslexia, their brain is “wired” differently — they’re using different pathways and regions of the brain when they read. But with the right instruction, **students with dyslexia are fully capable of learning how to read and achieving success in school.** The positive effect of high-quality reading interventions can be seen on brain scans, too!

While effective reading remediation is possible at any age, it gets harder and takes longer the more time passes. Addressing difficulties as soon as they show up helps keep students from falling behind their peers or losing self-esteem. See [Part III of this guide](#) to learn more about how to get help for your child in New York City Public Schools.

What are some signs that my child might be dyslexic?

Students with dyslexia may:

- Struggle to learn nursery rhymes, tell if two words rhyme, or make up their own rhymes.
- Have a lot of trouble learning the names and sounds of letters.
- Frequently mix up words that sound alike or mispronounce words that they already know (more than other children their age).
- Read aloud slowly and awkwardly, with lots of stopping and starting and mispronunciations.
- Frequently skip over words when reading.
- Read words that have no connection to the letters on the page but have similar meanings in context (for example, saying *puppy* instead of *dog*).
- Make wild guesses at words based on the initial letter sound or on the first and last letters, ignoring the rest of the word.
- Become frustrated or upset when asked to read or go to great lengths to avoid reading at all.



Dyslexia often runs in families, so if you or another family member struggled with reading in school — even if you were never diagnosed with a disability — that can also be a flag that your child may need extra help.

See AFC’s fact sheet [Reading Milestones: What your child should know and be able to do](#) for a list of the skills your child should be mastering in pre-K through second grade, as well as some possible signs of a reading disability at different ages.

Will my child be screened for dyslexia at school?

Schools in New York City are required to screen all students in grades K–9 (as well as some tenth graders) for potential problems with reading three times a year. This screening usually happens in September, January, and May. **Screeners are very quick “check-ups” that identify students who aren’t on track with their reading skills and may need extra support. They cannot diagnose dyslexia.**

Schools must use a screening tool called Acadience in grades K–2. For grades 3–8, schools screen students using either i-Ready or MAP Growth. MAP Growth is also used in grades 9–10. All these screening tools are standardized, research-based assessments used by schools across the country. This means they can help you understand how your child is doing compared to national norms, not just other children who live in New York.

If your child is in a Spanish dual language or bilingual program, they will be screened in *both* English and Spanish. The two screeners should be given on different days. Acadience, MAP Growth, and i-Ready are all available in both English and Spanish.

NOTE

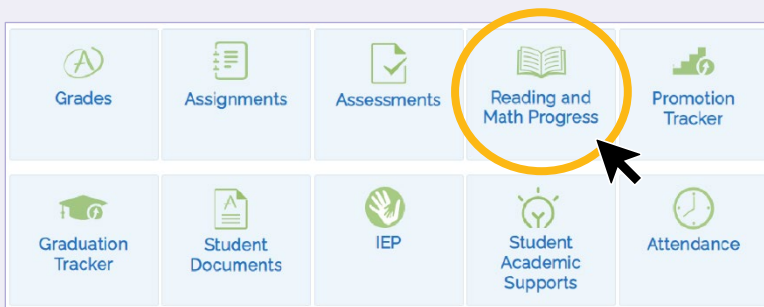
English Language Learners (ELLs) starting kindergarten or enrolling in NYC Public Schools for the first time who score “Entering” or “Emerging” on the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL) are exempt from the English-language screener the first time it is given after they enroll.

If screening shows cause for concern, the school may then give your child additional tests, called “**diagnostic assessments**” or “**verification of risk assessments**,” to better understand their needs and decide on the right response. Despite their name, diagnostic assessments do not diagnose disabilities like dyslexia, either. They are tools that help identify the specific skills where a student needs more instruction to become a proficient reader. The school should then use this information to develop a plan of action for providing that support.

If your child is an ELL, the school should *also* consider their literacy skills in their home language when deciding whether they need reading intervention. Some diagnostic assessments are available in Spanish as well as in English.

HOW TO SEE YOUR CHILD’S SCREENER RESULTS

You can see how your child did on the universal screener in your [NYC Schools Account \(NYCSA\)](#). Go to the “My Student” section and click “Reading and Math Progress”:



The school has more detailed data from the screener than what shows up in NYCSA. **If you have concerns about your child’s progress or want more information, ask your child’s teacher to show you that full report.** If your child’s screening results show they’re reading below grade level, talk to the school about what support they’re providing to help your child improve their skills.

Don’t have a NYCSA yet? Check out AFC’s [tip sheet](#) to learn how to use this NYCPS website application!

What kind of instruction does my child need if they have dyslexia?

Students with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia need instruction that is systematic, explicit, and intensive enough for them to make progress.

As described in [Part I of this guide](#), *systematic* and *explicit* means that:

- Lessons build on one another and follow a planned order.
- Everything is directly and clearly explained. Teachers model new skills and guide students in using those skills to read and spell.
- Students have lots of opportunities to practice and apply their knowledge in different contexts.



All children benefit from structured literacy. The teaching strategies that work for students with dyslexia work for everyone! The difference is that students with dyslexia *must* have systematic and explicit instruction to learn to read, while some kids will do okay no matter what sort of approach is used. Students with dyslexia also need instruction that's more intensive. This means they usually need significantly more time, repetition, and practice to master new skills.

You may have heard about a type of instruction called “Orton-Gillingham” or “OG.” **Orton-Gillingham isn't a specific program or curriculum that a school can purchase and use. It's a very structured, intensive, and multisensory approach to teaching decoding and word recognition skills.** It's named after Dr. Samuel Orton and the psychologist and educator Anna Gillingham, who first developed its principles in the 1930s.

Multisensory means that children experience learning material in multiple ways, using multiple senses, including sight, hearing, and touch/movement. For example, a teacher might have a student trace a letter with their finger while saying the sound the letter makes out loud. Multisensory teaching strategies aren't just for special education! They can help make instruction more engaging for all kids, while providing different ways for them to practice what they're learning. Reading programs that provide systemic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and the structure of language — the kind of instruction that is *essential* for students with dyslexia — are usually *also* multisensory.

Many reading intervention programs are described as “Orton-Gillingham based” because they use the key ideas and strategies developed by Dr. Orton and Anna Gillingham. Wilson Reading System, Phonics for Reading, S.P.I.R.E., and REWARDS are a few examples of OG-aligned intervention programs used in New York City schools (see [page 21](#)). Teachers who are “Orton-Gillingham certified” have taken extra coursework and had lots of training in best practices for teaching students with reading difficulties.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- For more information on dyslexia and supports for students with language-based learning disabilities, download the **International Dyslexia Association's [Dyslexia Handbook](#)**.
- [Understood.org](#) is a helpful website for parents and caregivers that provides information and resources on a wide range of topics, including learning disabilities, ADHD, social and emotional skills, and more.
- Students with dyslexia, vision impairments, and other qualifying disabilities can get *free* audiobooks at [www.bookshare.org](#).

PART III.

GETTING HELP IN NYC SCHOOLS

If you think your child may be having trouble learning to read and write, ask for help right away! You know your child best, and it's better to act early than to "wait and see." **Start with your school: talk to your child's teachers, the school psychologist, or the principal.** For suggestions of questions to ask to get the conversation started, see our [tip sheet](#) on literacy and parent-teacher conferences.

My child's school says they provide students with extra help in reading through MTSS. What does that mean?

As part of [NYC Reads](#), NYC Public Schools (NYCPS) has been training teachers and school staff in effective reading intervention programs and helping schools build systems for providing those interventions to students during the school day. **Intervention is targeted small-group or one-on-one help that students receive *in addition* to general classroom instruction.** The person who provides the intervention is often someone other than the student's classroom teacher. For example, 960 schools have a "centrally funded special education intervention teacher," or CFIT, who has received additional training in supporting struggling readers. Part of a CFIT's job includes providing reading intervention to students with and without disabilities.

NOTE

In 2026–27, ALL elementary schools in New York City should have implemented MTSS for reading as part of NYC Reads. Some middle and high schools have also set up these systems for providing literacy intervention, while others are just getting started.

By 2028, all schools in New York City are expected to implement comprehensive **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)** for reading. MTSS is a framework

for identifying which students need extra help and matching them to the right level of support. It is a school-wide preventative model, which means the goal is to intervene *before* students fall significantly behind. This model has three levels, or “tiers,” of instruction. Each tier is more intensive than the one that came before it.

TIER 1 • General classroom instruction for all students. Teachers use high-quality curriculum and adjust instruction as needed to support students who are having trouble.

TIER 2 • Intervention for struggling students. Students who aren’t making enough progress in Tier 1 get additional support in small groups, based on their specific needs. Tier 2 interventions are typically provided three to five times per week, in sessions of at least 20–30 minutes each. In grades K–5, Tier 2 literacy interventions usually take place in groups of up to six students. In grades 6–12, the group size is often larger.

TIER 3 • The most intensive level of intervention services. This means a student receives intervention more often (four or five times a week), for longer each time (sessions of 30–60 minutes), and in a smaller group (one-on-one or with just two or three other students for grades K–5; larger in grades 6–12). Instruction is also more explicit and intensive, with more opportunities for practice and review.

Implementing MTSS for reading means establishing a consistent time in the school day that is used specifically for literacy intervention and enrichment. Many schools call this block of time a **strategic reading period (SRP)** or a **WIN (What I Need) period**. During this time, schools provide tier 2 and 3 intervention to students who need more support learning to read. Students who are reading at or above grade level might spend this period participating in book clubs or literature circles, using a supplemental reading program, or doing other literacy-related enrichment activities in small groups.

Schools place students in intervention based on a variety of factors. Typically, students will have scored “below expectations” on the universal screener and had their need for intervention confirmed by a diagnostic assessment (see [page 15](#)).

When a student is receiving reading intervention, the school should be closely monitoring their progress to make sure the intervention is helping.

Progress monitoring assessments are given every one to six weeks, depending on the student’s needs and the intensity of the intervention.

ALPHABET SOUP: MTSS, AIS, & RTI

Two other terms/acronyms you might hear when you talk to your child's school are Academic Intervention Services (AIS) and Response to Intervention (RtI).

Academic Intervention Services (AIS) refers to extra instruction and support for students who need help meeting grade-level standards in reading, math, science, and/or social studies. You can think of AIS as a term for describing *what* is being provided (extra help in an academic subject) via MTSS (the structure for delivering that support). Schools are required to provide AIS to students who aren't meeting state learning standards. AIS is a general education service and all students in grades K–12, including students with disabilities and ELLs, are potentially eligible. Schools identify which of their students need AIS using state test scores, the universal screener, and other assessments.

In grades K–5, New York City schools are required to use a process called **Response to Intervention (RtI)** before referring a student to special education because of difficulties with reading. RtI is a multi-tiered model for matching students with the right level of support. RtI fits within the larger MTSS framework. The goal is to make sure students who *don't* have disabilities aren't inappropriately referred to special education because they haven't received quality instruction in general education.

NOTE If you think your child has a disability and needs special education services, you can ask for your child to be evaluated at any time. You do NOT have to go through multiple tiers of intervention first.

What reading intervention programs are used in New York City schools?

When it comes to reading intervention, there are many quality programs: **there's no one-size-fits-all solution that a school can go buy.** It's important that students are matched with an intervention that targets their specific needs. For example, an intervention that focuses just on reading fluency and comprehension is not the right choice for a student struggling with decoding.

Below are NYCPS-approved intervention programs and the grade levels in which they are commonly used. Some programs cover similar skills, so an individual school will not have every program on this list. Some schools may also use programs that are not listed below.

Program name	Grade level (grade in which the student is enrolled)	Instructional level (level at which the student is currently reading)
Sounds Sensible (<i>S.P.I.R.E. Foundations</i>)	Middle of K–2	K–1
S.P.I.R.E.	End of 2–5	2–5
Aprendo Leyendo*	2–5	K–2
Wilson Reading System	2–12	K–3
Phonics for Reading	3–12	K–5
Wilson Just Words	4–12	K–3
REWARDS Intermediate	4–6	3–5
REWARDS Secondary	6–12	3–5
REWARDS Plus	6–12	5–6
STARI	6–12	5–6

* Spanish-language intervention only used in schools with K–5 bilingual programs.

Supplemental reading programs

Many schools in New York City also use supplemental reading programs like i-Ready, Amira, Edmentum, Lexia, or Read 180. **Supplemental programs are NOT interventions, and they do NOT replace core instruction. Supplemental programs provide students with opportunities for extra practice with skills they have already been taught.** They can be used *in addition to* instruction and intervention, but they are *not* designed to remediate skill gaps or to teach children how to read. If your child is reading significantly below grade level, they will likely need more support than a supplemental program can provide on its own.

High-Impact Tutoring (HIT)

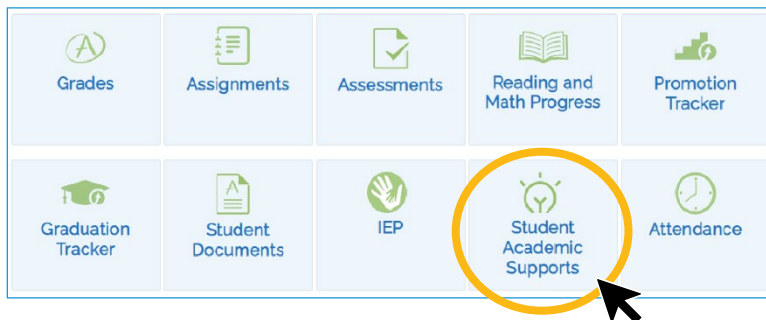
Some schools in New York City partner with a community-based organization, local university, or other outside provider to offer High-Impact Tutoring (HIT) in reading. Tutoring does not replace core instruction or intervention. HIT is an extra layer of support for students who may need additional assistance but are not in

intervention. In schools with HIT, trained tutors work with students one-on-one or in small groups at least three times a week to help them make greater progress in reading. Tutoring can happen either in person or virtually, either during the school day (for example, during a WIN period) or after school.

Does the school need my permission to provide intervention services?

The school does not need your permission to provide reading intervention. They are supposed to notify you in writing if they start or stop providing these services. The notice should be in your home language. It should tell you what intervention your child will be receiving and why. You also have the right to receive updates about your child's progress while they are receiving intervention services.

If your child is programmed for intervention, you can find this information in your [New York City Schools Account \(NYCSA\)](#). Go to the "My Student" section and click on "Student Academic Supports."



You will then see a page that shows:

- The academic subject(s) in which your child is receiving intervention.
- The name of the intervention program(s) being used.
- The days of the week and the total number of minutes per week that your child is scheduled to receive intervention.
- The name of the teacher or staff member working with your child.

ADVOCATING FOR YOUR CHILD

If your child is receiving reading intervention, some questions to ask the school include:

- ☐ What program is being used? Why was that program chosen for my child? How do you know it's the right fit?
- ☐ Are they receiving intervention one-on-one, or in a small group? How many other students are in the group?
- ☐ How often and for how long will my child receive the intervention? Will that be intensive enough to meet their needs?
- ☐ Who is working with my child and providing the intervention? How are that person and my child's classroom teacher communicating and coordinating efforts?
- ☐ How are you monitoring my child's progress? When will I get updates?
- ☐ What's the next step if this intervention doesn't help?

Put everything into writing. Many different reading programs exist, and some of them have very similar names. When you talk to the school, write down the date of the conversation, the names of the people you spoke with, and any information you learn right away so you can remember it later.

Keep notes on what interventions have been tried in a folder, along with copies of any letters or reports you get from the school. This information will be helpful to have if your child changes schools or if you need to advocate for different support in the future.

If you feel like you are not getting the help you need at the school, don't give up! Reach out to your Superintendent's Office for help. Every district has a Family Support Coordinator, who helps families resolve problems, and an AIS Coordinator, who can help schools that need support around implementing interventions. You can find the contact information for your Superintendent and Family Support Coordinator by looking up your school at <https://schoolsearch.schools.nyc/>.

What if my child has a disability?

Reading interventions provided through MTSS are appropriate for students with and without disabilities. However, students with disabilities may need instruction that's more intensive — to work with a teacher one-on-one or in a smaller group, or to spend more time receiving intervention to fully master new skills.

Some students struggling to learn to read may also benefit from special education services and specially designed instruction. **If you think your child has a disability, you can ask for your child to be evaluated at any time.** You do not have to wait and try general education intervention or “at-risk” services first.

If your child is not currently getting special education services...

Write to the school and ask them to evaluate your child. (If your child attends a charter school or is not enrolled in a public school, you should instead write to the Chair of your [Committee on Special Education](#).)

Evaluations help figure out if your child has a disability, what skills your child needs to work on, and what supports and services will help your child the most. If you want your child tested in a specific area (for example, if you're worried about their decoding skills), include that information in your written request.

NOTE

Receiving special education services does NOT make a student ineligible for support provided through MTSS. **A student can receive *both* reading intervention *and* special education services at the same time.**

If the evaluations find that your child qualifies for special education services, you will then meet with the school to create an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**. The IEP is an important legal document that outlines your child's needs and the programs, services, and accommodations they will receive. These recommendations should be based on what your child needs and not on what the school has available. See [page 28](#) of this guide for some examples of special education supports and services that can be helpful for students struggling with reading.

If your child already has an IEP...

You may want to ask for a new evaluation if your child is not making progress or if you think their needs have changed. NYCPS is *required* to reevaluate your child once every three years (unless you agree otherwise in writing), but you don't have to wait for this to happen. You can request a reevaluation at any time. However, in most cases, NYCPS will not do an evaluation more than one time in a year.

The IEP team must meet at least once each year to review your child's IEP, discuss their progress, and determine whether any changes to their services are needed. You have the right to request an IEP meeting at any time if you have concerns about your child's special education program or services. **As a parent, you are an important and required member of the IEP team!** You have the right to take part in all IEP meetings and to invite others (like a therapist or tutor, if your child is working with one) to join you. You also have the right to ask for translation and interpretation services if you speak a language other than English.

To learn more about special education in New York City, including required timelines, available programs and services, and your rights throughout the process, check out the [resources](#) on AFC's website.

What are my rights if I want a special education evaluation?

A student needs to be evaluated before getting any special education services. NYC Public Schools is required to evaluate your child for free. You should receive copies of those evaluations five days before the IEP meeting.

“Psychoeducational” vs. “neuropsychological”

For a child struggling with reading, NYC Public Schools will typically do what's called a *psychoeducational* evaluation, which combines psychological and academic achievement testing. **School psychologists are expected to identify and name specific learning disorders like dyslexia in their evaluation reports. However, a psychoeducational assessment cannot provide a *medical* diagnosis of a condition like dyslexia.** School-based findings can only be used in

the school context, for the purpose of identifying and addressing a student's educational needs.

A *neuropsychological* evaluation is a specialized type of evaluation that *can* provide a medical diagnosis of dyslexia. A neuropsychological evaluation includes many additional tests designed to assess how your child's brain works. It provides a detailed picture of a student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs. A school psychologist will sometimes decide that this type of evaluation is *also* needed to better understand a student's disability and how it affects their ability to learn. However, **a student does NOT need to have a neuropsychological evaluation or a medical diagnosis of dyslexia to receive special education services!**

Private and independent evaluations

You may decide you want to get an evaluation done by someone not connected to the public schools. There are two ways to make this happen.

(1) PRIVATE EVALUATIONS

A *private* evaluation is one set up and paid for by you or your health insurance company. You can get private evaluations yourself and share them with the school. The school must consider any private evaluations you bring them along with any evaluations they do themselves.

Private neuropsychological evaluations can be very expensive. As of January 2025, state law [requires](#) private health insurance policies to cover neuropsychological testing for purposes of diagnosing dyslexia. If you have individual or group coverage that was purchased in New York State, check your policy or call the number on your insurance card for more information on accessing this benefit. You may still have to cover some of the cost.

(2) INDEPENDENT EVALUATIONS

If the school fails to do evaluations on time, or if they do evaluations and you are not satisfied with them, you can ask NYC Public Schools to pay for an *independent* (outside) evaluation — a “second opinion.” Make this request in writing to your child's school (or your Committee on Special Education, if your child attends a charter or non-public school). NYC Public Schools will either pay for the

independent evaluation through an “assessment authorization form,” which lets you find a private provider at a city-approved rate; or they will file an impartial hearing to try to prove their own evaluations were appropriate. For more information, see AFC’s [Guide to Special Education](#).

My school says they’re not allowed to use the word “dyslexia” on my child’s IEP. Is this true?

No. Dyslexia is not one of the 13 disability classifications defined by special education law, so it won’t be listed in the “disability classification” box on the first page of the IEP. However, there is nothing in federal, state, or city law or regulations that says you can’t use the word “dyslexia” elsewhere on the IEP. For example, it could be used in the “present levels of performance and individual needs” section.

The New York State Education Department put out [guidance](#) in August 2018 that encourages use of the term dyslexia when it’s appropriate for a given student. New York City’s Special Education [Standard Operating Procedures Manual](#) (SOPM) also says that schools can identify dyslexia by name in evaluation reports, IEPs, and other special education documents. Schools don’t always know this, so you may want to bring a copy of those documents with you to the IEP meeting.

What special education supports and services can help a student struggling with reading?

Students with IEPs can receive a wide range of special education supports and services. The next two pages list a few options that NYCPS may suggest or that you may want to think about if your child has a language-based learning disability or is not making progress in reading.

NOTE: This is not a complete list of all available special education programs and services! For more, see our [Guide to Special Education](#).

Accommodations

Accommodations are changes to the way material is presented and to how students complete assignments, take tests, or show what they've learned. Accommodations do *not* change the content of instruction or the standards students are expected to meet.

Examples of accommodations that can help students struggling with reading include:

- Extra time on tests
- Test-taking in a separate location
- Having directions read out loud
- Texts shown in larger print
- Pre-written outlines or class notes
- Graphic organizers or visual aids

Assistive Technology (AT)

Reading below grade level should not prevent a student from accessing age-appropriate books that they're able to understand! Assistive technology (AT), such as text-to-speech software, can help students who struggle with decoding or fluency by letting them focus on content and meaning, instead of getting stuck on individual words. This is *especially* true for older students who are still working on foundational skills because they didn't receive appropriate instruction when they were young. While technology is not a substitute for effective reading instruction and intervention, it can keep students engaged and on track with the curriculum.



NOTE

NYCPS policy limiting 1:1 screen time during the school day does NOT apply to assistive technology and associated screen time provided through a student's IEP.

If you think your child could benefit from assistive technology, ask your school for an AT evaluation. To learn more, see AFC's [Guide to Assistive Technology](#).

Speech/language therapy

Speech therapy is a related service that helps children develop speaking and listening skills. It is recommended for students who have difficulty communicating, making speech sounds, and/or processing and understanding language. Speech therapy can take place individually or in a small group. It can help students develop phonological awareness and language comprehension skills, both of which are very important for becoming a strong reader.

Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS)

Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) is supplemental or specially designed instruction provided by a special education teacher, either directly or indirectly. A student can get SETSS specifically to help with reading.

DIRECT SETSS • The student works with a special education teacher individually or in a group of no more than eight students for part of the day. This can happen in their regular classroom (“push-in” services) or in a separate location (“pull-out” services).

INDIRECT SETSS • Instead of working directly with your child, a special education teacher works with their general education teacher to help the teacher adjust the learning environment or instructional methods.

Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) Services

An integrated co-teaching (ICT) class is a class with two teachers: a full-time general education teacher and a full-time special education teacher. Students with IEPs make up about 40% of the class and learn alongside their peers who *don’t* have IEPs.

Support outside of school

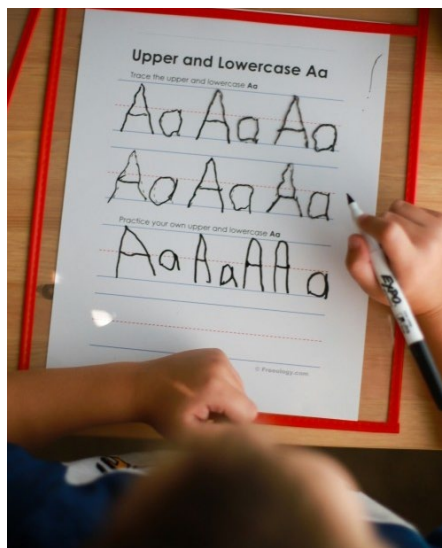
If the public schools have failed for a long time to teach your child to read and write, your child may be eligible for extra help outside of school. If you believe this is the case, you can ask for intensive reading tutoring from an outside provider as a legal remedy. For more information on how to do this, see AFC’s [Guide to Special Education](#) or call our Helpline.

Does New York City have any special schools or programs for students who have dyslexia or need more support learning to read?

New York City has a few programs specifically designed for students who have language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia or who need more intensive support building foundational literacy skills.

The IREAD specialized program

The Intensive Reading Education and Development (IREAD) Early Literacy Program is a specialized NYC Public Schools program designed to provide intensive support to students with and without IEPs who are struggling with reading. It is a reduced class size integrated co-teaching (ICT) model, which means students with and without disabilities learn together in a classroom with two teachers, one of whom is a special education teacher. Teachers in IREAD classrooms have received extra training in structured literacy and the science of reading. An additional reading specialist also provides support for the class.



The IREAD program currently serves grades K–7, and there are a limited number of seats. In 2026–27, the program is in fifteen schools (see next page).

If you think this program might be a good fit for your child, submit an [application](#) online. You can apply at any time. Your child does NOT need to have an IEP or a diagnosis of a specific learning disability in reading. The IREAD team will review your child's educational records and may schedule additional assessments to see if the program can meet their needs. If your child is accepted to the program, you will be offered a placement at a specific school that has an IREAD class.

For more information, check out NYCPS' [specialized programs webpage](#) and contact IREADProgram@schools.nyc.gov with questions.

Borough	District	School	Grades with IREAD classes
Manhattan	2	P.S. 234 Independence School	K–5
Manhattan	2	M.S. 297 (75 Morton)	6
Bronx	9	P.S. 070 Max Schoenfeld	K–5
Bronx	9	Bronx Writing Academy (X323)	6
Bronx	10	P.S./M.S. 037 Multiple Intelligence School	K–1
Bronx	12	P.S. 691 Bronx Little School	K–5
Brooklyn	14	P.S. 023 Carter G. Woodson	K–5
Brooklyn	14	M.S. 582 The Magnet School for Multimedia Technology and Urban Planning	6
Brooklyn	15	P.S. 124 Silas B. Dutcher	K–5
Queens	24	P.S. 088 The Seneca School	K–1
Queens	27	P.S. 316 Queens Explorers Elementary School	K–5
Queens	27	P.S./M.S. 043 The School by the Sea	6–7
Queens	30	P.S. 384 Hunters Point Elementary School	K–4
Staten Isl.	31	P.S. 065 The Academy of Innovative Learning	K–5
Staten Isl.	31	I.S. 002 George L. Egbert	6

Literacy-focused public schools

There are three stand-alone public schools in New York City that have a special focus on serving students who have dyslexia or other reading difficulties.

South Bronx Literacy Academy (SBLA) and **Central Brooklyn Literacy Academy (CBLA)** are public schools designed to serve students who need extra support building strong foundational skills. At both schools, all classes are ICT classes and provide intensive structured literacy instruction to students with and without IEPs. In 2026–27, SBLA (in District 7) is serving grades 2–6 and CBLA (in District 17) is serving grades 2–4. Both schools will eventually grow to serve grades 2–8. Learn more about the schools and their admissions process at www.literacyacademycollective.org.

Bridge Preparatory Charter School is a charter school on Staten Island that serves students in grades K–5, with a focus on children with language-based learning disabilities. Learn more about the school and their admissions process at www.bridgeprepcharter.org.

Private special education schools

There are several private special education schools in New York City that specialize in working with students with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities. There are three ways that the City will pay for a private school when it has not provided an appropriate public school placement for a student.

(1) NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL RECOMMENDATION

The IEP team may decide that the public school system has no appropriate program that can meet your child's needs. In this case, NYCPS will recommend a [state-approved](#) non-public school (NPS) on your child's IEP.

(2) A P-I (“NICKERSON”) LETTER

If your child's IEP recommends a small special education class and NYCPS fails to offer a placement by the legal deadline, you may be entitled to receive a P-I letter (also called a “Nickerson” letter). A P-I requires the City to pay tuition for the school year for an appropriate state-approved NPS that will accept your child.

(3) PAYMENT THROUGH AN IMPARTIAL HEARING

If NYCPS fails to provide your child with a disability with an appropriate education, you may be able to win payment for tuition at a private special education school, including schools that are not on the state-approved list. To obtain tuition payment this way, you will need to file for an impartial hearing. These cases can be complicated, so we recommend contacting an attorney.

To learn more, please see AFC's [Guide to Special Education](#) or call our Helpline.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

AIS – Academic Intervention Services

AT – Assistive Technology

CFIT – Centrally-Funded Special Education Intervention Teacher

CSE – Committee on Special Education

DOE – Department of Education
(another name for NYC Public Schools)

ELA – English Language Arts

ELD – English Language Development

ELL – English Language Learner

ENL – English as a New Language

FAPE – Free Appropriate Public Education (*what the law requires schools to provide every student with a disability*)

HIT – High-Impact Tutoring

HQIM – High-Quality Instructional Materials (*term often used to describe effective curricula*)

ICT – Integrated Co-Teaching

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (*federal special education law*)

IEP – Individualized Education Program

IREAD – Intensive Reading Education and Development program

LD – Learning Disability (*disability classification used on the IEPs of some students with dyslexia*)

MTSS – Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

NPS – Non-Public School

NYCPS – NYC Public Schools

NYCSA – New York City Schools Account

NYSED – New York State Education Department

OG – Orton-Gillingham

RTI – Response to Intervention

SETSS – Special Education Teacher Support Services

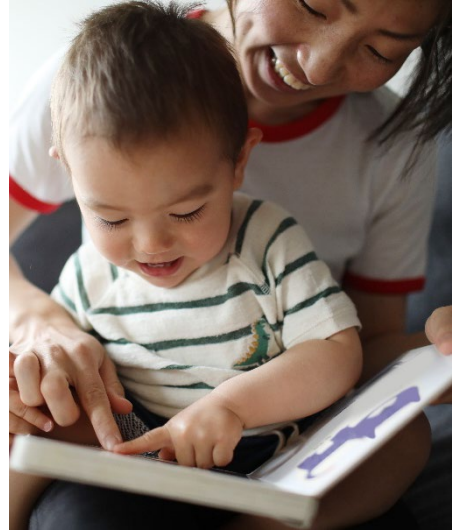
SOPM – Standard Operating Procedures Manual (*manual explaining the processes and procedures governing special education in New York City*)

SRP – Strategic Reading Period

WIN – What I Need (*class period dedicated to intervention and enrichment*)

RESOURCES IN NEW YORK CITY

- [Brooklyn Book Bodega](#) distributes free children's books at community events around Brooklyn. Visit their website for a list of upcoming events.
- [Literacy In Communities \(LINC\)](#) is a non-profit that holds free community events, book giveaways, and workshops for families of children ages 0–5 in neighborhoods across New York City. Visit their website to learn more and find programs near you.
- [Literacy Partners](#) offers workshops in English and Spanish for parents and caregivers of children in elementary school. They also run a Reading for Adults class for individuals ages 18 and up who need help building their foundational literacy skills.
- [Read718](#) provides free or low-cost tutoring for low-income students in grades 3–8 who are reading below grade level. They have locations in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Boerum Hill.
- All NYC Public Schools students have access to a library of e-books and audiobooks on [Sora](#).



This guide and additional resources on educational services in New York City are available on our website, www.advocatesforchildren.org.

Reading a printed copy of this guide? Scan the QR code to open the online version and access all of the hyperlinks!





Our Mission

Advocates for Children of New York (AFC)'s mission is to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. AFC achieves this through four integrated strategies:

- Free advice and legal representation for families of students;
- Free trainings and workshops for parents, communities, and educators and other professionals, to equip them to advocate on behalf of students;
- Policy advocacy to effect change in the education system and improve education outcomes; and
- Impact litigation to protect the right to quality education and to compel needed education reform.

Have questions or need assistance?

Please call AFC's Jill Chaifetz Education Helpline:

Monday through Thursday
10 am to 4 pm
866-427-6033 (toll free)

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