

IDA Corrects Inaccuracies in Downey/Bacallao Opinion Column

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We are deeply troubled by the number of inaccuracies and misrepresentations recently published by AJC.com in “Opinion: Mistake to test all Georgia kindergarteners for dyslexia” by Mary Kay Bacallao under Maureen Downey’s column. We are not disputing Ms. Bacallao’s right to her opinion; however, you are doing a great disservice to your readership and to the work of our organization by publishing an opinion that claims to be supported by facts that do not hold up to basic fact checking.

For starters, the most glaring inaccuracy is about the nature of our organization. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is not a “private corporation.” IDA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, scientific, and educational organization dedicated exclusively to the study and treatment of the specific language disability known as dyslexia. We have been serving individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field for over 70 years. We do not endorse specific programs, we have not lobbied as a private organization, we have no “corporate interests,” and we are certainly not a “private corporation enlisting the force of the government.”

If by “enlisting the force of the government” Ms. Bacallao meant working in [collaboration with other parties](#), including government entities and grassroot parent organizations such as Decoding Dyslexia to inform practice and research and to raise awareness about dyslexia with the purpose of helping the millions of students in this country who cannot read, then we are guilty as charged. IDA has been doing this work for over seven decades in collaboration with various stakeholders—families and people struggling with dyslexia, educators, researchers, advocates, policymakers, and policy shapers. Each has played a vital role in helping us advance a clear, concise, research-informed understanding of dyslexia and promote effective reading instruction for *all* children.

The definition of dyslexia was never intended to be or presented as the “solution once and for all.” As eloquently stated by the editor-in-chief Linda Siegel in the most [recent issue](#) of the IDA quarterly publication, [Perspectives on Language and Literacy](#), “scientific understanding and progress depend on having precise definitions of the phenomena in question...If there are laws mandating recognition of, and

hopefully, intervention for dyslexia, then it is important to agree on what we are talking about.”

In fact, the research inspired by this definition led to the development of IDA’s [Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading](#) and the components of [effective reading instruction](#) that we call Structured Literacy™. Effective reading or Structured Literacy is supported by research as cited in IDA’s fact sheet [Effective Reading Instruction](#) and in our recently published brief for teachers, [Structured Literacy: An Introductory Guide](#).

All children, especially those with dyslexia, respond best to reading instruction that includes the components of Structured Literacy:

- explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy across multiple components (e.g. phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationships, syllable patterns, morphemes, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, text structure, comprehension strategy instruction, etc.);
- cumulative practice and ongoing review of previously introduced/mastered skills;
- a high level of student-teacher interaction;
- the use of carefully selected examples and non-examples to teach essential concepts, skills, and strategies;
- the use of decodable texts in developmental contexts; and,
- prompt, corrective feedback.

The fundamental nature of the instruction or instructional targets does not change for children with dyslexia. What changes is the duration, intensity and opportunity for small group instruction.

Sadly, this instruction is not widely implemented in our nation’s schools. Without early screening and intervention, the millions of students in our country who struggle to read will not benefit from Structured Literacy. “Reading is a fundamental skill that not only gives access to knowledge and alternative points of view, but also provides the foundation for success in school and opens up vocational opportunities,” states Nadine Gaab, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Boston Children’s Hospital and the Harvard Medical School, in [“How Can We Ensure That Every Child Will Learn to Read? The Need for a Global, Neurodevelopmental Perspective.”](#)

Ms. Bacallao argues that universal screening would result in overdiagnosis, but screening and diagnosis are not the same thing. Dr. Gaab tells us that “While a diagnosis of dyslexia currently requires repeated failure learning to read, this does not mean that early signs of dyslexia cannot be observed in preschool (or possibly earlier).” (For more on this, see Dr. Gaab’s article [“It’s a Myth That Young Children Cannot Be Screened for Dyslexia!”](#) in our e-letter, the [Examiner](#).)

We would argue that under identification is a much greater risk than overdiagnosis. Research has shown that the rapid growth of the brain and its response to instruction in the primary years make the time from birth to age eight a critical period for literacy development (see our fact sheet [Universal Screening: K–2 Reading](#)). Therefore, it is imperative to identify the instructional needs of struggling students as soon as possible... to “catch them before they fall” (Torgesen, 1998).

Finally, we do agree with Ms. Bacallao on one point: we should do our best to help every individual learn to read. In fact, our tag line is “[until everyone can read!](#)” This is why we work to overcome barriers to providing quality, research-validated reading instruction to *every* child in every classroom across the nation and around the world. This instruction is important for all children, but it is absolutely vital for those with dyslexia.

Unfortunately, some students are still struggling to learn to read at a time when “they need to read to learn.” The collaboration with Made by Dyslexia, Microsoft, and other organizations vis-à-vis assistive technologies and accommodations is in no way intended to take the place of learning to read, but for some students who are falling behind, these tools offer hope and help to access information in critical content areas. To be clear, [Ear reading is not intended to be a substitute for effective reading instruction](#). But the two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

[The good news is that most reading difficulties can be resolved or diminished](#), but only if we work together. Publishing opinion pieces with unsubstantiated claims does not help our students. Please join us in our pursuit of effective reading instruction for all students and the training of the teachers who will provide it.

We encourage Ms. Bacallao and Ms. Downey to reach out to our local branch affiliate in Georgia at info@idaga.org, to visit our [local website](#), [national website](#) or to call us at 404-256-1232 so that we can provide further information. Further we ask the thousands of parents and advocates supporting Senate Bill 48 to contact Governor Brian Kemp with their unwavering support of this first necessary step toward serving dyslexic students in Georgia. Together we can change the course of thousands of lives by giving them the gift of reading.