MASSACHUSETTS
Department of Elementary
and Secondary Education

EARLY LITERACY SCREENING
GUIDANCE

Purpose

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) created this guidance document to support schools and districts as they conduct early literacy universal screenings required by Massachusetts regulation *603 CMR 28.03 (1)(f),* effective July 1, 2023.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Importance of Early Literacy Universal Screening

A well-developed screening process that examines **all** students' early literacy skills is an important part of an equitable, culturally and linguistically sustaining literacy plan that matches evidence-based instruction and supports to students' needs. Early literacy universal screening is proactive and designed to gather information on the most predictive literacy skills, making it possible to identify each student's **risk of experiencing reading difficulties**, including risk of dyslexia. This screening process and resulting data analysis allow educators to intervene with targeted evidence-based instruction at the first indication that a student may be experiencing challenges in learning to read. Using a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) model, educators use data to inform core instruction, instructional pacing, intensity, and differentiation of targeted intervention, as well as determine if additional assessment is needed.

Additional Information: The Importance of Early Literacy Universal Screening*
Mass Literacy: Early Literacy Universal Screening (Video)
Summarizes the importance of early literacy universal screening.
Early Screening is at the Heart of Prevention (Reading Rockets)
Provides background information on early literacy universal screening.
English Learners and Dyslexia (International Dyslexia Association)
Summarizes the considerations for English Learners with early literacy universal screening.

Early Literacy Screening in Relation to the MA Dyslexia Guidelines

Early Literacy Screening Regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f)

In September 2022, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted a regulation that requires school districts to assess, at least twice per year, each student's reading ability and progress in literacy skills, from kindergarten through at least third grade. The regulation states:

> **Early Literacy Screening.** Effective July 1, 2023, each school district shall at least twice per year assess each student's reading ability and progress in literacy skills, from kindergarten through at least third grade, using a valid, developmentally appropriate screening instrument approved by the Department. Consistent with section 2 of chapter 71B of the general laws and the Department's dyslexia and literacy guidelines, if such screenings determine that a student is significantly below relevant benchmarks for age-typical development in specific literacy skills, the school shall determine which actions within the general education program will meet the student's needs, including differentiated or supplementary evidence-based reading instruction and ongoing monitoring of progress. Within 30 school days of a screening result that is significantly below the relevant benchmarks, the school shall inform the student's parent or guardian of the screening results and the school's response and shall offer them the opportunity for a follow-up discussion.

In summary, the regulation requires schools and districts to:
- Assess each student's reading ability from kindergarten through at least third grade at least twice per school year;
- Use a valid, developmentally appropriate, DESE-approved early literacy screening instrument;
- For students whose screening results are significantly below relevant benchmarks:
  - Determine which actions within the general education program will meet the student's needs; and
  - Within 30 school days, inform the student's parent or guardian of the screening results and the school's response, and offer them the opportunity for a follow-up discussion.

The regulation does not address many details and implications of early literacy universal screening, leaving the *how* and *when* to the discretion of the school and district. As schools and districts move forward to implement the requirements in the regulation, it may be helpful to consider the information and resources in the MA Dyslexia Guidelines and the Mass Literacy Guide.

The MA Dyslexia Guidelines

DESE created the MA Dyslexia Guidelines consistent with M.G.L. Chapter 71, § 57A to provide a clear and practical set of organized, research-based best practices for the early screening, instruction, and accommodation of students with reading difficulties and/or learning disabilities, including but not limited to dyslexia. The regulation takes some of the recommendations in the MA Dyslexia Guidelines (2020) and formalizes them as requirements. The Guidelines serve three main purposes:

> ➢ To provide a set of screening guidelines for all students, including students demonstrating one or more potential signs of a neurological learning disability including, but not limited to, dyslexia; and
> ➢ To provide a framework of intervention for students at risk of dyslexia and other learning difficulties that is timely and responsive; and
> ➢ To provide a comprehensive resource of evidence-based practices aimed at all educators to support students at risk of dyslexia and those identified as having dyslexia, consistent with and linked to other guidance from DESE.

It is important to note that early literacy universal screening assessments **do not diagnose dyslexia**. Please see the section *Early Literacy Universal Screening and Dyslexia Risk* (page 11) for more information.

Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessments	
• DO identify a student's risk for poor reading outcomes • DO help to quickly differentiate between students that need intervention or additional assessment and those that do not (International Dyslexia Association)	• DO NOT diagnose dyslexia • DO NOT identify a disability • DO NOT act as a substitute for a formal evaluation as part of the eligibility process for special education

Early Literacy Screening Regulation: Selecting an Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment

Early Literacy Screening Regulation:
School districts must assess each K-3 student with a
DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessment.

Recommendations for Selecting an Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment

In 2022, DESE engaged in a comprehensive process to identify early literacy universal screening assessments that align with the MA Dyslexia Guidelines and principles of anti-bias. A diverse group of experts which included researchers, teachers, administrators, and specialists worked with DESE to determine assessment criteria. Publishers had the opportunity to submit information about their assessments, which were reviewed and scored based on established criteria such as technical adequacy, attention to linguistic diversity, administrative usability, and valid measures of the developmental skills in early literacy. For further information, consult this summary of established criteria. Current DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessments are designated in two categories: *Meets Expectations* and *Partially Meets Expectations*.

DESE-Approved Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessments

The following early literacy universal screening assessments are currently **approved** and meet the requirements of the regulation. DESE reviews early literacy universal screening assessment submissions on a rolling basis. For the most up-to-date approved list, visit DESE's Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment webpage.

Approved: Meets Expectations	Approved: Partially Meets Expectations
Met all criteria in the 2022 review.	*Met many criteria and did not meet at least one area in the 2022 review.*
• DIBELS 8th Edition by the University of Oregon • EarlyBird by EarlyBird Education (for Kindergarten) *(English only)* • mClass by Amplify Education	• Acadience by Voyager Sopris Learning • Fastbridge by Illuminate • i-Ready by Curriculum Associates • MAP Reading Fluency by NWEA • STAR by Renaissance

Note: Approved early literacy universal screening assessments are available in Spanish or have some subtests available in Spanish unless otherwise noted. DESE did not review the Spanish versions of the assessments.

Additional Information: Selecting an Approved Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment
The following resources are available to assist schools and districts in selecting an approved early literacy universal screening assessment that best fits their student population and community.

At-a-Glance: Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessments
Summarizes the characteristics, costs, and publisher contact info for each approved early literacy universal screening assessment.
Highlights and Challenges of Approved Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessments
Summarizes highlights and challenges to be aware of for each approved early literacy universal screening assessment.

Types of Assessments

There are two types of assessments on the DESE-approved screening assessment list: computer adaptive and not computer adaptive.

Characteristics of Universal Screening Assessments that are Computer Adaptive	Characteristics of Universal Screening Assessments that are Not Computer Adaptive
• Length of assessment varies by student • Assessment of predictive early reading skills varies based on student responses • Difficulty level is adjusted based on student response • Difficulty level is reduced after an incorrect response and increased after a correct response • Testing stops once the student's ability has been estimated to a certain level of accuracy	• Length of assessment is brief • Assessment of predictive early reading skills is the same for all students • Generally, one-minute probes • Alternate forms can be administered 2-3 times per year • Standardized administration and scoring (International Dyslexia Association)

When considering choosing a Computer Adaptive Test (CAT), keep in mind that CATs adjust tasks and questions based on student responses, so not every student will be answering all the same questions. However, teachers do have the ability to administer specific subtests if needed. This is especially important when assessing students who may perform well on more challenging tasks, yet teachers suspect there may be an underlying area of difficulty. The example below shows how a CAT may assess skills.

> **Example of How Computer Adaptive Tests Assess Skills and Report Data**
> On a DESE-approved CAT for grade one, the middle of the year (MOY) test includes a passage reading task. Students that score at the appropriate threshold on this task are not assessed on foundational skills. Because they performed well on the more difficult task (passage reading), it is expected they would perform well on foundational skills subtests (such as decoding nonsense words). One benefit to this approach is reduced testing time; however, no scores will be available for some or all foundational skills.

Schools and districts may choose to use the CAT as designed, recognizing that some predictive skills will not be routinely assessed. DESE suggests--in cases where an educator suspects a student may have difficulties with early literacy skills--that the educator adjusts the CAT's default settings. This allows the educator to administer specific subtests that the student might not otherwise see and may help the educator to gain a better understanding of the student's skills. All DESE-approved CAT early literacy universal screening assessments can assess foundational skills at least three times during the school year, as this was a required component for approval.

Note: Some publishers of the CATs on the DESE-approved screening list identify their screening tool as computer adaptive diagnostic. This means that the assessment seeks to identify the cause of students' reading difficulty. It is important to note that none of the computer adaptive tests on the DESE-approved universal screening list were reviewed as diagnostic assessments. All computer adaptive assessments, including those designated by the publisher as diagnostic, were reviewed by DESE in the capacity of a universal screening assessment only. For more information on the purposes of universal screening and diagnostic assessments, see Mass Literacy: Data-Based Decision Making.

Early Literacy Screening Regulation:
*Schools and districts must assess each student in grades K-3 with a DESE-approved early literacy screening assessment **at least twice** per school year.*

Recommendations for Assessment Timelines and Scheduling

Schools and districts must administer a DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessment to each student *at least twice* per year in grades K-3. While conducting twice-annual assessments satisfies the regulatory requirement, school districts may choose to conduct more frequent assessments, giving them additional opportunities to identify and address student reading challenges in a timely manner. When determining the schedule of screening assessments, the school district may wish to consult with school staff, families, and groups such as their local Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC).

The **sample** schedule below reflects the MA Dyslexia Guidelines' recommended assessment timeline. The initial assessment for kindergarten students is not recommended for September because this may be many students' first school experience and waiting until later in the fall may give a more accurate picture of their abilities.

Grade	Beginning of Year				Middle of Year				End of Year	
	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
Kindergarten			X						X	
Grade One	X				X				X	
Grade Two	X				X				X	
Grade Three	X				X				X	

Note: The 'X' suggests a general timeframe.

Assessed Skills in Grades K-3

Reading development is a dynamic process that evolves throughout the early grades. Skills that are highly predictive of reading difficulties among kindergarten students may no longer be as predictive among second graders. Therefore, recommendations for skill-based subtests will vary by grade level, and in some cases, time points within a year.[1] All DESE-approved screening tools can assess skills based on the timeline shown below.

Recommended Timeline for the Assessment of Reading Skills.
For information on the screening measures for each skill, see Chapter 4 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines.

Skill Measured	Grade K		Grade 1			Grade 2			Grade 3		
	BOY/MOY	EOY	BOY	MOY	EOY	BOY	MOY	EOY	BOY	MOY	EOY
Phonemic Awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Alphabetic Knowledge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rapid Automatized Naming	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓		
Word/Passage Reading			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reading Comprehension						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

DESE recommends assessing the skills listed below in grade three; they are the same as those measured in grade two. All DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessments can measure these skills. For schools and districts using computer adaptive tests, the skills assessed are determined by student responses. It is important for teachers and school-based data teams to decide when and if it is appropriate to adjust pre-determined settings by the publisher so that specific predictive skills can be measured.

Grade 3 Skills Assessed

SKILL	BEGINNING OF YEAR	MIDDLE OF YEAR	END OF YEAR
Alphabetic Knowledge	Decoding (Nonsense Words) to be administered at the three benchmark periods		
Word Reading	Passage Reading Fluency to be administered at the three benchmark periods		
Reading Comprehension	Reading Comprehension to be administered at the three benchmark periods		
Rapid Automatized Naming	RAN-Letter Naming	None	None

Screening Considerations for Student Groups

Most students in grades K-3, including multilingual learners and students with disabilities, should be assessed with the same screening assessment,[2] allowing data analysis and educator collaboration across the school and/or district over time. However, there may be students for whom a different approved assessment may be more informative. For example, students with no computer experience may be more accurately assessed using a teacher-administered assessment.

Some screening assessments include accommodations for various student groups, though accommodations are likely to change how the assessment functions. It is important to review the universal screening assessment's administration manual to better understand available accommodations and their implications. In many cases, scores for students using accommodations (such as untimed) can be used to measure individual student growth, but scores are no longer determinant of risk.[3]

Multilingual Learners

The early literacy screening regulation requires schools to screen all students including multilingual learners. Educators should not wait until students' English oral language proficiency is fully developed to assess multilingual learners to identify risk of reading difficulties. This can result in needless delay of evidence-based interventions. There is not a minimum English proficiency level required for consideration of a neurocognitive disability, including dyslexia.[4]

Research has demonstrated that language development affects performance differently depending on what skill is being measured.[5] For this reason, assessments should be provided and administered in the form most likely to yield accurate information on what the student knows and can do, including in the student's native language(s) when appropriate as described below. To understand risk of reading difficulties for multilingual learners, schools should also gather and use information from other data sources in addition to universal screening and progress monitoring assessment measures. It is critical to understand and capitalize on what a student can do while also identifying areas of concern.[6]

> In this guidance, the following terms are used to refer to students:
>
> **Multilingual learner** – students who know or are learning two or more languages
>
> **English learner** – students who have qualified for EL services under ESSA OR when students with EL status are cited within research
>
> **Bidialectal learner** – students who speak two dialects of the same language

Recommendations for Gathering and Using Screening Data for Multilingual Learners

- Supplement screening assessment data with observation-based protocols to provide a wider view of students' skills in various contexts, including both academic and social settings. Use data that examines student language development performance during meaningful activities rather than focusing only on their use of isolated components of language.[78]
- Assess students' language skills in reading in both their native language and in English when determining their current levels of performance. Assessing in both languages can be a highly effective way to determine if a student's reading skills are consistent across languages and not the result of acquiring second language proficiency.
- If a student's home language is one that does not have a DESE-approved assessment tool, consider developing and administering assessment measures translated or adapted by highly trained translators/interpreters or service providers **as a supplement to** (not a substitute for) required screening assessments.

Note: For considerations for screening and instruction of bidialectal learners, please refer to Chapter 9 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines.

Interpreting Assessment Data for Multilingual Learners

Research has shown that the levels of developmental language proficiency and cultural knowledge acquisition do affect multilingual learners' scores on tests administered in English.[1] When working with multilingual learners who present with signs of reading difficulties, student performance should be compared with that of a typical developmental second language progression. It is important to seek answers to two key questions:

1.   Are the student's reading difficulties due to learning English?
2.   Is the student making typical progress when compared to multilingual learners with similar backgrounds?

When screening data indicates that a multilingual learner may be at risk for reading difficulties, it's important to take the next steps. Additional data may be needed to determine whether the student's reading difficulty stems from learning English, or a reading difficulty that is present even in their native language. Family interviews may be particularly useful to make this distinction, especially if they help schools understand the student's native language development relative to early literacy milestones. For a list of suggested family interview questions, please see Chapter 9 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines. Additionally, comparing the student to "true peers"[1] may yield a more accurate picture of the student's literacy skills than comparing them to classmates more generally.

Additional Information: Early Literacy Universal Screening and Multilingual Learners*

English Learners and Dyslexia - International Dyslexia Association (dyslexiaida.org)
Summarizes considerations when evaluating English Learners for dyslexia.

Chapter 9 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines: Considerations for Multilingual and Bidialectal Learners at Risk for Dyslexia (coming soon!)
Summarizes considerations for identifying and meeting the unique needs of students who are both multilingual or bidialectal and who have or are at risk for a neurological learning disability, including dyslexia. Note: A revised Chapter 9 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines will be available in summer 2023 and the links within this document will be updated.

Students with Disabilities

School districts are required to screen all students in grades K-3 for early literacy skills, including students with disabilities. Although many students with disabilities can be screened in the same way as their peers without disabilities, some students may have needs that should be considered when administering and analyzing early literacy assessments. Based on the student's disability and Individual Education Plan, the IEP team may wish to consider, for example:

- **Does the student need accommodations?** Some accommodations may impact the reliability of the screening assessment's results, so please refer to the assessment's technical manual for additional information.
- **Do the accommodations impact reliability of results?** Based on the student's disability and the accommodations given, determine if the universal screening should be used primarily for progress monitoring and benchmarking rather than as an indicator of risk.
- For some students, it may be beneficial for the student to be assessed with a universal screening assessment that is brief with a teacher closely monitoring the student's engagement.

Students with Sensory Impairments

To date, DESE has not reviewed assessment tools that can be used for students whose primary expression is through sign language or assistive technology. Schools should monitor these students' literacy progress through their 504 plans and/or their IEP goals and objectives.

Note: Please note that there are assessments available in Braille offered by some approved screening publishers. DESE has not reviewed these assessments.

Additional Information: Accommodations information provided by assessment publishers*

DIBELS 8th Edition by the University of Oregon: Acceptable Accommodations (Page 51, Table 2.2)
Summarizes accommodations for DIBELS 8th Edition and mClass.
EarlyBird by EarlyBird Education: Accommodations Guidance
Summarizes accommodations for EarlyBird
mClass by Amplify: Acceptable Accommodations (Page 51, Table 2.2)
Summarizes accommodations for mClass and DIBELS 8th Edition.
Acadience by Voyager Sopris: Reading Assessment Accommodations
Summarizes accommodations for Acadience K-6.
Fastbridge by Illuminate/Renaissance: Special Accommodations
Summarizes accommodations for Fastbridge.
MAP Reading Fluency by NWEA: Accommodations, Universal and Designated Features
Summarizes accommodations for MAP Reading Fluency.
i-Ready by Curriculum Associates: Universal Accessibility Features and Accommodations Guidance
Summarizes accommodations for i-Ready.
Star by Renaissance: Accessibility and Accommodations (Video)
Summarizes accommodations and uses math assessment to demonstrate available tools.

Dyslexia: A Specific Learning Disability in Reading

DESE affirms the definition of dyslexia adopted by the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and endorsed by the International Dyslexia Association:

> Dyslexia is a **specific learning disability** that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the International Dyslexia Association)

The purpose of early literacy screening is not the same as the purpose of diagnosing dyslexia.[9] Early literacy universal screening helps identify risk levels for reading difficulties and is not a substitute for the formal evaluation that can diagnose dyslexia, which is a specific learning disability. The MA DESE Special Education Eligibility/Initial and Reevaluation Determination form provides the framework for special education eligibility. As noted in 603 CMR 28.02(9), eligibility for special education services requires the IEP Team to determine that the student has a disability and, as a consequence, is "unable to progress effectively in the general education program without specially designed instruction or is unable to access the general curriculum without a related service." The eligibility process to determine if a specific learning disability (SLD) is present requires IEP Team members to affirm that the area of concern is not primarily due to exclusionary factors, including cultural; environmental or economic disadvantage; limited English proficiency; and other factors. DESE provides robust guidance to determine special education eligibility and specific learning disabilities.

> *A diagnosis of dyslexia cannot be determined by any one single test*. A diagnosis of dyslexia includes consideration of background information, school history, and comprehensive assessment of both oral language (speaking and listening) and written language (reading and written expression) skills at all levels from the simplest to the most complex. (International Dyslexia Association)

Some school and district teams may not be accustomed to using expressions such as "diagnosis of dyslexia" or "meets the criteria of dyslexia." A team of educators can determine if students meet the criteria for dyslexia during eligibility testing and/or re-evaluations.[10] For more information about the subtypes of dyslexia, refer to Chapter 2 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines.

Additional Information: Dyslexia*
Schools and districts may find the following resources helpful: • International Dyslexia Association: Testing and Evaluation   • The Yale Center for Creative Dyslexia: Dyslexia Evaluation Overview   • Reading Rockets: The Comprehensive Evaluation   • MA DESE Specific Learning Disability: Dyslexia   • Chapter 8 of MA Dyslexia Guidelines   • Tools and Resources for Addressing English Learners with Disabilities

Early Literacy Universal Screening Regulation: Family Communication

Early Literacy Screening Regulation:
Within 30 school days of a screening result that is significantly below relevant benchmarks, schools and districts must:

→ Inform the student's parent or guardian of the screening results

→ Inform the student's parent or guardian of the school's instructional response

→ Offer the student's parent or guardian the opportunity for a follow-up discussion

Recommended Components of Family Communication

The following section outlines best practices that support effective family communication. While the regulation requires that districts notify families when a screening result is significantly below the relevant benchmarks, DESE recommends that districts inform **all families of students' screening results**. When establishing a screening protocol, consider how families will be engaged in decision-making and kept updated on their child's reading performance.[11] An effective family communication process will consider *what* information to share with families, and *how and when* that information is shared.[12] Effective family communication around early literacy universal screening may include:

Purpose of Screening	Inform families about the requirement for schools to conduct these early literacy screenings. Explain that early literacy universal screening is a way to collect and analyze reliable and valid data on the most predictive literacy skills, helping to identify each student's risk of experiencing reading difficulties.
Overview of Assessment Administered	Describe the multidisciplinary team that will work in partnership with families to share information about the assessment used, the skills being assessed, the times of the year that the assessment will be administered, and when results will be communicated to them.
Student Results	Share the child's screening result with their family and explain what it means in terms of risk of reading difficulties. Explain what the child's scores mean in relation to the child's reading skills and academic profile. Where applicable, the team may coordinate with the district's English as a Second Language/bilingual specialists on how to understand results that may be related to language development for multilingual learners.
Overview of Classroom Instruction	Provide families with an overview of the instruction students are receiving as their core instruction.

Recommendations for Family Communication for Students with a Screening Result that Is Significantly Below Relevant Benchmarks

- Provide an overview of the intervention and/or individualized support students will receive and offer ways families can support the student at home.
- Inform families when they can expect to receive updated information on their child's progress based on progress monitoring assessments.

Suggested DOs and DON'Ts of Family Communication

DOs	DON'Ts
☑ Plan for how the district will communicate with families consistent with the requirements of the early literacy screening regulation ☑ Communicate with families in their preferred language for all screening communications ☑ Use family-friendly language ☑ Give families information about district literacy and assessment approach BEFORE the student results go home ☑ Explain what the numbers in any family report mean ☑ Include considerations of language development alongside scores for students who are multilingual learners ☑ Get feedback from families on effectiveness of district communications	☒ Use lots of educational jargon ☒ Send home complicated graphs and statistics ☒ Provide numerical scores without any context or explanation ☒ Use alarming language such as "failing" or "deficit"

Family Reports

All the approved screening assessments include a report designed to share student results with families. Schools and districts should review the provided reports and determine if they are appropriately family-friendly, useful, and asset-based before deciding whether to use the report, or to create another document to communicate students' results to their families.

Additional Information: Family Communication*

There are resources in the Appendix to help schools and districts create family communication letters:
- Sample Family Letters in Appendix A.

Understanding Screening: Overall Screening and Assessment (National Center on Improving Literacy)
Summarizes recommendations for supporting families with universal screening.

The Strengthening Partnerships Family Engagement Frameworks
Summarizes recommendations for family engagement.

Recommended Components of Professional Development

Educators must be prepared to implement any screening assessment, interpret the results, determine instructional next steps for students, and communicate with families about the results in a supportive and empowering way. Include all educators with roles within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) in professional development and support before and during the screening and notification process. All the publishers of DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessments offer a variety of training opportunities including self-directed webinars as well as virtual and in-person professional development opportunities. Support for educators on early literacy universal screening may include the following topics:

Role of Early Literacy Universal Screening	• Purpose of early literacy universal screening assessments to measure predictive early literacy skills • Understanding risk of reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia
Overview of Screening Assessment	• Design of screening assessment including the subtests that determine the composite score, risk levels and how each subtest measures specific foundational skills • Standardized guidelines to implement the assessment with fidelity and collect reliable data • Additional processes to support gathering data such as observations for multilingual learners
Accessing and Interpreting the Data	• How to access all student reports and data points to understand students' risk level, including specific scores indicating strengths and possible areas of growth • Interpreting the data in view of specific student groups and instruction to make equity driven data-based decisions

Instructional Planning	• Using student data from reports to create intentional instruction plans in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team including ESL/Bilingual educators and reading specialists
	• Understanding data-based decision making:
	  o To plan access and engagement to high-quality grade-level instruction for all students in core instruction
	  o To set up student groupings with specific instructional focus areas and/or interventions based on needs

Family Engagement	• Plan ahead for how the district will communicate with families consistent with the requirements of the early literacy screening regulation • District recommended resources to share with families (letters, meeting agendas, data reports from assessment, etc.) to support and empower home-school partnerships that are culturally and linguistically sustaining

Early Literacy Screening Regulation: Determining Significantly Below Relevant Benchmarks

Early Literacy Screening Regulation:
*If a screening assessment determines that a student is
significantly below relevant benchmarks for age-typical development
in specific literacy skills, the school or district must:*
→ Determine which actions within the general education program will meet the student's needs, including:
- differentiated or supplementary evidence-based reading instruction, and
- ongoing monitoring of the student's progress in literacy

Considerations for Determining Significantly Below Relevant Benchmarks

The regulation does not quantify the term "significantly below relevant benchmarks for age-typical development in specific literacy skills." Each DESE-approved early literacy universal screening assessment employs different language or icons to indicate risk level. As stated in the MA Dyslexia Guidelines, DESE recommends using the 25th percentile or less metric to define the category of "significantly below relevant benchmarks."

For students scoring in the bottom quartile (25th percentile or lower) of an early literacy assessment, schools and districts will need to determine which actions within the general education program will meet the student's needs. This could include differentiated or supplementary evidence-based reading instruction or other intervention. If more information is needed to determine appropriate interventions or next steps, the MA Dyslexia Guidelines recommend considering additional general education diagnostic assessments in phonemic awareness, phonics, and word reading.[13]

Screening assessments are designed to predict the likelihood of reading difficulties without the presence of targeted, intense intervention. The chart below explains the likelihood of reaching a benchmark without strong core classroom instruction **and** evidence-based intervention. Data collected through the screening process should be reviewed by school-based teams to make equitable decisions regarding evidence-based interventions for students. Schools and districts can determine the frequency and duration of the intervention based on a variety of student data and information as well as the early literacy screening results. **Please review Chapter 9 of the MA Dyslexia Guidelines regarding interpreting scores for multilingual and bidialectal learners for additional important information.**

The language and metrics included in the chart are adapted from the technical manuals of each early literacy universal screening assessment. Please refer to the technical manual of your school's/district's universal screening assessment for additional details.

Suggested Designations for Determining Significantly Below Relevant Benchmarks for Age-Typical Development with DESE-Approved Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessments

Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment	At/Above Benchmark	Below Benchmark	Significantly Below Benchmark*
	Publisher-Specific Language for Student Scores		
DIBELS 8th Edition *Paper version*	Minimal/Negligible Risk	Some Risk	At Risk
EarlyBird	Minimal/Negligible Risk	Some Risk	Flag Icon
mClass and DIBELS 8th Edition *Digital version*	At/Above Benchmark	Below Benchmark/ Strategic Support	Well Below Benchmark/ Intensive Intervention
Acadience	At/ Above Benchmark	Below Benchmark	Well Below Benchmark
Fastbridge	Low/No Risk	Some Risk	High Risk
i-Ready	No Observed Risk	At Some Risk	At Risk
MAP Reading Fluency	At Grade Level	Approaching Grade Level Expectations	Flag and/or Below Grade Level Expectations
STAR	At/Above Benchmark	Below Benchmark/On watch	Intervention and Urgent Intervention

	What It Means		
	At/Above Benchmark *Minimal/Negligible Risk*	**Below Benchmark** *Some risk*	**Significantly Below Benchmark** *At-Risk*
	Students are less likely to develop reading difficulties. All students need strong core instruction in the classroom and some students may benefit from monitoring of specific skills (progress monitoring).	Students are likely to need strategic evidence-based intervention in specific skill areas. In addition to strong core instruction in the classroom, students' progress in literacy should be monitored regularly to determine if they are making adequate progress. Frequency and duration of support to be adjusted based on progress monitoring data. Intervention does not supplant strong core evidence-based classroom instruction.	Students are at risk of future reading difficulty and most likely need *intensive* evidence-based intervention. Actions to support intensive intervention include: decrease group size or provide individual instruction; increase intervention frequency and/or duration. In addition to strong core instruction in the classroom, students' progress in literacy should be monitored regularly to determine if they are making adequate progress. Intervention does not supplant strong core evidence-based classroom instruction.

*Students who demonstrate significant risk for dyslexia and **score at the fifth percentile** or below on screening measures, should automatically receive universal supports in Tier 1 instruction coupled with intensive support in Tier 3, and depending on the students' ages, grades, and educational histories, they *may* be considered for referral for a special education evaluation. **Performance at or below the fifth percentile on screening measures is not intended to be the sole criterion for special education eligibility determination or for specialized intervention at the Tier 3 level.**[14]

Some of the DESE- approved early literacy universal screening assessments allow the school or district to set their own local norms, which may impact the risk level identification process. For example, students would be compared against students in their own district or school rather than a national norm. **Districts should use national norms either on their own or alongside local norms to accurately identify students at risk. Using local norms alone is not recommended.**

While early literacy assessment tools are helpful to identify students who may be at risk for reading difficulties, evidence-based classroom instruction is vital to every student. The best early literacy universal screening program will not make a difference if classroom instruction does not target student needs with evidence-based, culturally and linguistically sustaining instruction and intervention.[15] The multi-tiered system of support is rooted in proactivity and prevention, and relies on data.[16] Teams of teachers use data from multiple assessments to plan tiered instruction that meets students' needs. Early identification of students at risk for difficulty is a central goal of MTSS.[17] Data collected through ongoing screening and benchmark assessments can both identify at-risk students and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction across grades and tiers.[18]

Early Literacy Universal Screening is used to:

- Gather data on students to identify student reading proficiency levels and students at risk for reading difficulties
- Determine individualized instructional support based on students' needs in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team
- Evaluate the effectiveness of core literacy curriculum and instruction for all students, as well as subgroups of students, by aggregated and disaggregated data[19]

Using Early Literacy Universal Screening to Inform Data-Based Decision Making

Data from universal screenings should be used to make informed decisions about core instruction, evidence-based interventions, and progress monitoring. Using data to improve student achievement requires a commitment to analysis, planning, and instructional adjustments across the entire school year so that instruction is culturally and linguistically sustaining for all students. Data-driven instruction is a dynamic and iterative process that evolves as new information about student performance is collected via formal tools like screening and benchmark and progress monitoring data, as well as informal tools like teacher observations in multiple contexts and diagnostic inventories. Watch the webinar below to learn more about using evidence-based instruction to support literacy leadership within a multi-tiered system of support.

Mass Literacy: Getting Started — Leading a Multi-tiered System of Support

The MA Dyslexia Guidelines and the Mass Literacy Guide

The MA Dyslexia Guidelines is a comprehensive resource of evidence-based practices aimed at all educators to support students at risk of dyslexia and those identified as having dyslexia. The guidelines are consistent with and linked to the Mass Literacy Guide. The Mass Literacy Guide is an interactive site that includes research, information, and resources to empower educators with evidence-based, culturally, and linguistically sustaining practices for literacy. The MA Dyslexia Guidelines along with the Mass Literacy Guide provide a wealth of information and support around early literacy instruction and assessment within an MTSS model.

*Please note that this letter is an example
that may be adapted for your local community.*

Dear Families,

I am writing to share information about one of the ways your child in grades K-3 will be assessed in reading this year. Our teachers have many ways to check your child's reading development and growth, including an **early literacy universal screening assessment**. Early literacy universal screening assessments are brief tests that provide information about your child's early reading skills. Screening makes it possible to see if a student is at risk of developing reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia. Screening does not diagnose dyslexia or other disabilities, but it does help us understand which students may need additional support to be successful readers. We are required to assess students in grades K-3 at least twice per year consistent with Massachusetts regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f).

Our district uses a screening assessment called [name of the screener with link to webpage]. It is one of several screening assessments approved by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Your child will be assessed two or three times during the school year, depending on grade level [adapt to school schedule, if needed]. It typically takes [X minutes] to complete this assessment, and the tentative schedule for this school year is shown below.

[SAMPLE SCHEDULE]

Grade	Screening Assessment Dates (Subject to Change)
Kindergarten	1. Week of November 13, 20XX 2. Week of March 11, 20XX
Grades 1, 2, 3	1. Week of October 9, 20XX 2. Week of February 5, 20XX 3. Week of May 6, 20XX

Following the screening assessment, a team at our school will review all students' results. Parents/Guardians will receive a family report that provides an overview of their child's results. If your child scores "significantly below benchmarks," we will contact you within 30 school days of testing, to discuss how we can support your child.

Please reach out if you would like additional information.
- For questions about the early literacy universal screening, contact Principal XXX
- For questions about your child's testing results, contact your child's teacher.

Screening is another step that helps students at our school become proficient readers, and we are grateful for the continued support and partnership with the [School Name] families.

Best,
Principal

> *Please note that this letter is an example that may be adapted for your local community.*

Dear Families,

I am writing to share an update about early literacy universal screening in grades K-3 at our school. We recently completed assessing our students and soon you will receive a Family Report that explains your child's results. These actions are included in Massachusetts regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f), which requires all public schools in the state to assess students' reading skills in grades K-3 at least twice a year.

As a reminder, early literacy universal screening is used to determine a student's risk for reading difficulty and to guide us in providing reading support. It is not a diagnosis or determination of a disability.

Our School's Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment
Our school's early literacy universal screening assessment is [name of the screener with link to webpage], which is approved by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. [Name of screener] is computer adaptive, so questions are adjusted (made easier or more difficult) based on student responses. For this reason, your child's report may not include the same information as other children's reports, even among those at the same grade level.

Important Early Reading Skills
Early literacy universal screening assessments are used to assess skills that may predict future reading difficulties. These skills include alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, word reading, reading comprehension, and rapid automatized naming. Skills are assessed differently depending on the student's grade level.

[Optional: Consider whether this information may be helpful to include.]

Alphabetic Knowledge	Students' familiarity with the names and sounds of letters and letter patterns.
Phonemic Awareness	Students' knowledge of individual sounds in language.
Word/Passage Reading	Students' ability to read words accurately and fluently.
Reading Comprehension	Students' ability to understand and make meaning of a text.
Rapid Automatized Naming	Students' ability to rapidly name a limited set of repeatedly presented known objects or letters.

Family Communication
If your child scores "significantly below benchmarks," we will contact you within 30 school days of testing to discuss how we can support your child. We will offer an opportunity for a discussion of your child's results which will include next steps.

Early literacy universal screening is an important tool to help promote your child's success as a reader. We are grateful for your continued partnership, and please contact me with any questions about early literacy universal screening.

Best,
Principal

Please note that this letter is an example that may be adapted for your local community.

Dear Families,

I am writing to share an update about early literacy universal screening in grades K-3 at our school. We recently completed assessing our students and soon you will receive a Family Report that explains your child's results. These actions are included in Massachusetts regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f), which requires all public schools in the state to assess students' reading skills in grades K-3 at least twice a year.

As a reminder, early literacy universal screening is used to determine a student's risk for reading difficulty and to guide us in providing reading support. It is not a diagnosis or determination of a disability.

Our School's Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment
Our school's early literacy universal screening assessment is [name of the screener with link to webpage], which is approved by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. [Name of screener] is given to each child by a teacher or staff member and takes about [X minutes] to complete.

Important Early Reading Skills
Early literacy universal screening assessments are used to assess skills that may predict future reading difficulties. These skills include alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, word reading, reading comprehension and rapid automatized naming. Skills are assessed differently depending on the student's grade level.

[Optional: Consider whether this information is helpful to include.]

Alphabetic Knowledge	Students' familiarity with the names and sounds of letters and letter patterns.
Phonemic Awareness	Students' knowledge of individual sounds in language.
Word/Passage Reading	Students' ability to read words accurately and fluently.
Reading Comprehension	Students' ability to understand and make meaning of a text.
Rapid Automatized Naming	Students' ability to rapidly name a limited set of repeatedly presented known objects or letters.

Family Communication
If your child scores "significantly below benchmarks," we will contact you within 30 school days of testing, to discuss how we can support your child. We will offer an opportunity for a discussion of your child's results which will include next steps.

Early literacy universal screening is an important tool to help promote each child's success as a reader. We are grateful for your continued partnership, and please contact me with any questions about early literacy universal screening.

Best,
Principal

> *Please note that this letter is an example that may be adapted for your local community.*

Dear Families,

I am writing to share information about your child's results on the early literacy universal screening assessment. As we have shared in prior letters, early literacy universal screening is used to help schools identify students who are at risk for reading difficulties, including risk of dyslexia, and is required consistent with Massachusetts regulation 603 CMR 28.03(1)(f). Your child was assessed on [date].

Our literacy team reviewed the results, and your child's score on this assessment is significantly below relevant benchmarks for [grade X]. Our school is committed to providing students with the supports needed to become strong readers, so I am inviting you to a family-school discussion about your child's reading progress. This is an opportunity to talk about ways our school can give your child the support they need in reading. As a reminder, early literacy universal screening is used to determine a student's risk for reading difficulty – it is not a diagnosis or determination of a disability.

What to Expect at the Family-School Discussion (Virtual or In-Person)
Who will be participating?
Our discussion can be in-person or virtual and may include the following school staff:
(School and/or district determine which school members should participate)
- A member of our literacy/data team
- Your student's teacher
- LIST OTHER MEMBERS HERE as appropriate (Guidance, Administrator, Child Study Team Member, ESL/Bilingual Specialist, etc.)

What will we discuss?
We will discuss the following topics:
1. **Information**: We will discuss your child's results and see if more information is needed to understand your child's reading progress. Early literacy universal screening assessments are brief, and our team might need to do additional assessments to learn more about specific reading skills that seem difficult for your child. These skills are listed in the chart below and are assessed differently depending on the grade level.

   [Optional: Consider whether this information is helpful to include.] For multilingual learners, it's important to look at how learning a new language impacts their results. We will discuss how language development impacts your child's results.

Alphabetic Knowledge	Students' familiarity with the names and sounds of letters and letter patterns.
Phonemic Awareness	Students' knowledge of individual sounds in language.
Word/Passage Reading	Students' ability to read words accurately and fluently.

Reading Comprehension	Students' ability to understand and make meaning of a text.
Rapid Automatized Naming	Students' ability to rapidly name a limited set of repeatedly presented known objects or letters.

2. **Student Support/Intervention:** We will discuss information from your child's teacher, the universal screening assessment, other assessments, and information from you to help develop an intervention plan that addresses your child's reading needs and gives your child the supports needed to be a strong reader.

3. **Monitor Progress:** We will make a plan to communicate your child's reading progress and explain how we will determine the effectiveness of the support we provide.

Please be aware that an intervention is a general education response to meet your child's reading needs– it is not a part of special education. If we suspect that a student has a disability based on the screening data, and/or other data, we will notify you in writing and ask for your consent to conduct a special education evaluation, and to explain more about this process. This early literacy assessment will not be used to delay or deny the evaluation of a student suspected of having a disability. If you suspect your child may have a disability, you may make a referral for an evaluation consistent with the Massachusetts special education regulations at 603 CMR 28.04 (Referral and Evaluation).

Our families are our partners in achieving student success, and we are grateful for your continued support. Please contact me with any questions about these next steps to support your child in reading.

Best,
Principal

Acknowledgements

DESE would like to acknowledge all the individuals who contributed to the creation of this Early Literacy Screening Guidance. We have been fortunate to have input and feedback from dedicated stakeholders who partnered with us throughout the development of this guidance document to help provide greater clarity to support schools and districts as they meet requirements for early literacy universal screening and center the experience of students and families from an asset-based, culturally, and linguistically sustaining perspective.

Massachusetts Educators

Jennifer Amigone, Cambridge Public Schools
Trina Camarao, New Bedford Public Schools
Amanda Campbell, Lynn Public Schools
Hillary Casson, UP Education
Kim Chappell, North Adams Public Schools
Megan Gregory, Scituate Public Schools
Jennifer Hogan, Pentucket Regional School District
Megan Kelty, Public Schools of Northborough and Southborough
Susan Kazeroid, West Springfield Public Schools
Karen MacKinnon, Foxborough Public Schools
Kenneth Mai, KIPP Massachusetts
Cristie McGrath, Brooke Charter Schools
Laura Mendes, Springfield Public Schools
Melissa Newell, Lowell Public Schools
Ron Noble, Methuen Public Schools
Kristy Peterson, Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District
Alyssa Piermarini, Clinton Public Schools
Amy Richardson, Salem Public Schools
Lisa White, Plymouth Public Schools

Research Advisors and Partner Organizations

Nancy Duggan, Decoding Dyslexia MA
Leandra Elion, The Reading Circuit
Norma Hancock, SAiL Lab, Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions
Phyllis Hardy, Multistate Association for Bilingual Education
Tiffany Hogan, SAiL Lab, Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions
Nicole Locher, Dyslexia Parents Group of Lexington
Susan McGilvray-Rivet, Multistate Association for Bilingual Education
Claudia Rinaldi, Lasell University
Maria Serpa, Lesley University
Rebecca Westlake, Multistate Association for Bilingual Education

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Mary L. Brown, Office of Literacy and Humanities
Jamie Camacho, Special Education Planning & Policy Development
Martha Daigle, Special Education Planning & Policy Development
Donna Goldstein, Office of Literacy and Humanities
Erin Hashimoto-Martell, Center for Instructional Support
Samantha Kodak, Office of Language Acquisition
Amy Paulin, Public School Monitoring
Allison Pickens, Office of Literacy and Humanities
Vandana Rastogi-Kelly, Public School Monitoring
April Rist, Special Education Planning & Policy Development
Linda Sewnarine, Office of Literacy and Humanities
Katherine Tarca, Office of Literacy and Humanities
Martha Wiley, Statewide System of Support

[1] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020). Chapter 4. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[2] Gersten, R., Baker, S. K., Shanahan, T., Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). Effective literacy and English language instruction for English learners in the elementary grades: A practice guide (NCEE 2007- 4011). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/20074011.pdf; Geva & Wiener, 2015.

[3] Royer, J. M., & Randall, J. (2012). Testing accommodations for students with disabilities. In K. R. Harris, S. Graham, T. Urdan, A. G. Bus, S. Major, & H. L. Swanson (Eds.), APA educational psychology handbook, Vol. 3. Application to learning and teaching, 139–158. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/13275-007

[4] Gersten, R., Baker, S. K., Shanahan, T., Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). Effective literacy and English language instruction for English learners in the elementary grades: A practice guide (NCEE 2007- 4011). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/20074011.pdf; Geva & Wiener, 2015.

[5] Cathers-Schiffman, T. A., & Thompson, M. S. (2007). Assessment of English- and Spanish-speaking students with the WISC-III and Leiter-R. Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 25, 41–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282906293214

[6] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020*).* Chapter 9. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[7] Esparza Brown, J., & Sanford, A. (2011). RTI for English language learners: Appropriately using screening and progress monitoring tools to improve instructional outcomes. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Response to Intervention, 10–11. https://mtss4success.org/resource/rti-english-language-learners-appropriately-using-screening-and-progress-monitoring-tools;

[8] WIDA. (2017). WIDA focus on identifying ELLs with specific learning disabilities: Facts, advice, and resources for school teams. https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/FocusOn-Identifying-ELLs-with-Specific-Learning-Disabilities.pdf

[9] Petscher, Y., Fien, H., Stanley, C., Gearin, B., Gaab, N., Fletcher, J.M., & Johnson, E. (2019). Screening for Dyslexia. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy.

[10] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020*).* Chapter 2. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[11] National Center on Improving Literacy (2019). Best practices in universal screening. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy.

[12] Herman, J., & Mancevice, N. (2019). How Is My Child Doing? What Assessment Can Tell Parents About Their Child's Learning. The Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED588455.pdf

[13] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020*).* Chapter 6. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[14] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020*).* Chapter 5. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[15] Gaab, N. (2017). It's a Myth That Young Children Cannot Be Screened for Dyslexia! - International Dyslexia Association. International Dyslexia Association. https://dyslexiaida.org/its-a-myth-that-young-children-cannot-be-screened-for-dyslexia/

[16] Harlacher, J. E., Sakelaris, T. L., & Kattelman, N. M. (2014). Practitioner's guide to curriculum-based evaluation in reading. New York, NY: Springer.

[17] Leonard, K., Coyne, M. D., Oldham, A., Burns, D., & Gillis, M. (2019). Implementing MTSS in Beginning Reading: Tools and Systems to Support Schools and Teachers. Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 34(2), 110–117. https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12192

[18] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020). Chapter 5. *Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines*.

[19] Petscher, Y., Fien, H., Stanley, C., Gearin, B., Gaab, N., Fletcher, J.M., & Johnson, E. (2019). Screening for Dyslexia. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy.