



Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Instructional Office Newsletter

Dyslexia: Myths, Look-Fors, and Classroom Strategies

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez confesses that when she was a classroom teacher, she was “woefully ill-equipped to support students in my room with special needs – those who arrived with a formal diagnosis and those who didn’t.” She followed students’ IEPs, which usually involved shortening assignments, giving extra time, and sometimes reading material out loud, but didn’t see those strategies as very helpful.

Of course every school has trained special educators, but since they have limited time and many students with IEPs are spending an increasing amount of time in regular-education classes, Gonzalez believes it’s important “for the rest of us to step up our game.” She believes a good place to start is dyslexia, and interviewed Lisa Brooks of the Commonwealth Learning Center’s Professional Training Institute in Massachusetts. Brooks started with two common misconceptions:

- **Myth #1:** *Dyslexia is uncommon.* In fact, experts believe 15-20 percent of students are affected to some degree, which means in a class of 20 students, three might have some symptoms. Missing a dyslexia diagnosis – perhaps saying a student has attention problems or is developmentally immature – can delay important interventions.

(Continued on page 2)

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IMPORTANT DATES

December 21	Winter Solstice begins at 11:19pm
December 22	Hanukkah begins at sundown
December 23-January 1 No School- Holiday Vacation	
December 24	Christmas Eve
December 25	Christmas Day
December 26-January 1 Kwanzaa	
December 31	New Year’s Eve

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person’s health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!





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• **Myth #2:** *Dyslexia means the child reads or writes backwards.* It's actually common for children up to age six to write letters backwards. This isn't what dyslexia is about, says Brooks: "It's really a difficulty in the phonological component of language, and that means children having difficulty with the sounds of words."

So what symptoms of dyslexia should teachers look for? Two are particularly important to spot in the primary grades, and dealing with them early can make a big difference in students' future success:

• **First,** a student's struggles in reading and writing are unexpected because he or she is strong in other areas. If a child has a good vocabulary, speaks in paragraphs, and loves books but has trouble remembering a letter or a letter sound, that's a clue.

• **Second,** the student has difficulty with the sounds of language – for example, identifying the first letter when sounding out a word; blending sounds into words; segmenting words into sounds; pronouncing multisyllabic words like *specific*; rhyming; performing rote memory tasks like remembering songs or the days of the week; correctly repeating words; or spelling a word without representing all its sounds (for example, writing butterfly *burfly*).

Gonzalez and Brooks suggest several effective strategies to support students with dyslexia:

- Direct instruction in phonics, teaching students to crack the code of language.
- Overlearning – these students need a lot more practice with skills than other students do, even if it seems boring.
- Learning experiences that involve using more than one sense simultaneously – for example, naming a word, tracing the letters, segmenting it, and writing it.

- Sound, music, and rhyming games – these are fun ways to give students more practice.

"How to Spot Dyslexia, and What to Do Next" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Lisa Brooks in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 13, 2019,
<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/spot-dyslexia/>

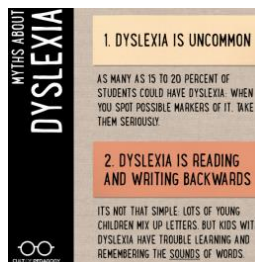
Questions That Help PLCs Close Achievement Gaps

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University and Health Sciences High) and John Almarode (James Madison University) say professional learning communities are not always fulfilling their potential. The authors suggest five questions to focus same-grade/same-subject teams on improving teaching and learning and achieving equitable outcomes:

• **Where are we going?** Learning goals that are well-framed and clear can also contain low expectations – for example, a fifth-grade team planning lessons based on third-grade expectations. When this happens, say Fisher, Frey, and Almarode, students don't work up to their potential and achievement gaps aren't closed. Teacher teams need to put grade-level expectations on the table, analyze the gaps and barriers to better performance, and orchestrate the support that students need.

• **Where are we now?** "When teams discuss the current performance levels of their students," say the authors, "they are often confronted with the reality that some students have not had equitable opportunities to learn to grade-level standards, and they are called on to accept responsibility to close the gap." This is the heart of PLC work.

• **How do we move learning forward?** When teams don't get specific on this question, say Fisher, Frey, and Almarode, "some well-





meaning teachers end up using ineffective approaches, like assigning worksheets or doing all the work for students.” The culture of a teacher team has to be such that team members are candid with each other and share teaching practices that produce results – including materials and pedagogy that are culturally relevant.

- **What did we learn today?** This includes students’ academic progress based on frequent checks for understanding, and also teachers’ lesson-by-lesson insights on what’s working, what reteaching and extension tasks are necessary, and how pedagogy can be improved.

- **Who benefited and who did not?** The authors believe it’s important for PLCs to break down assessment data by student subgroups. The Progress versus Achievement Tool is helpful www.visiblelearningplus.com/groups/progress-vs-achievement-tool (registration required). So is plotting students’ achievement on this quadrant:

Students who achieved well but did not make a lot of progress	Students who achieved well and made strong progress
Students who did not make progress and did not achieve at the average of the class	Students who made progress but still need to achieve more

One teacher team that used this approach noticed that the lower left-hand quadrant was filled with English learners. “Without visualizing the data this way,” said a teacher, “I would have focused on the individual students in my class who needed more support. But it’s clear that we need to do something different for our English learners if we have any hopes that they will succeed.”

“5 Questions PLCs Should Ask to Promote Equity” by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Almarode in *The Learning Professional*, October 2019 (Vol. 40, #5, pp. 44-47), <https://bit.ly/2pDNI6W> and scroll down; the authors can be reached at dfisher@sdsu.edu, nfrey@sdsu.edu, and almaroit@jmu.edu.

7 Teacher Tips for Surviving the week Before the Holiday Break

1. Don’t build anticipation.

Assemblies, presentations, and other holiday events are unavoidable in December, but you can prevent your class from getting over-excited by staying focused on daily routines instead of special activities. I list my schedule changes in a prominent place for the type of children who need to have a plan, but I don’t mention the special events at all unless we need to prepare. If a student asks when the holiday party is, I point to the schedule, then change the subject.

Right before an event, I explain what’s happening in a calm voice: “We’re going down to the cafeteria now for the chorus performance. That will take up part of our math time. When we get back, we will complete our math warm-ups just like we usually do, and then continue with our graphing activity.”

2. Resist the urge to ease up on your behavioral expectations.

Believe me when I say that easing up will backfire completely. When the teacher is lackadaisical, it just adds to the environment of chaos that the students are slowly creating and makes it harder to get the class back on track. If the kids run to line up, shake your head and nonchalantly tell the whole class to sit back down and try again. “I know you’re excited about the chorus performance. But we need to line up in a quiet and orderly way, just like we always do. Let’s see which table is ready to try again. Watch Team Three as they walk at an *appropriate pace* over towards the door. Notice how they pushed their chairs in. Do you see how they are facing forward and not talking? Excellent. Team Four, your turn to try.”





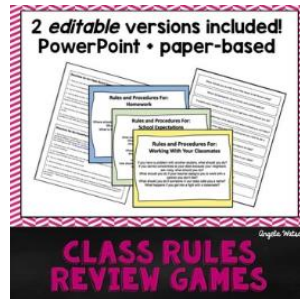
Yes, it's December. And yes, you still have to do this.

3. Review your procedures and expectations.

It's probably been a few weeks or months since you've articulated and modeled some of your classroom procedures for the entire class. (Just because you tell the same four kids over and over that NO, they cannot get a drink in the middle of a lesson, does not mean the rest of the class was paying attention when you reiterated your expectations.)

A fun way to reinforce the rules is with my [Class-Rules-Review-Games-Fun-paper-based-PowerPoint-activities-335544](#)

There's one PPT slide for each category of expectations (Papers, Homework, Moving Around Campus, Working Cooperatively, etc.), and each slide has questions about related classroom routines. The slides *don't* include the answers so that the kids can supply them (bonus: you can modify your rules without redoing the PowerPoint).



This can be used as a teaching tool and to spark discussion, or can be played as a competition between teams (who knows our classroom routines the best?). I always liked to do a few slides each week during December and again when we returned in January, and it made a remarkable difference in how smoothly my classroom ran.

4. Integrate high-interest projects and group work into your regular routines.

I like to finish the majority of my content instruction early in the month so that students can spend most of the last week before break just practicing and applying skills. On the last few days of December, they typically published their narrative essays in writing, completed main idea partner activities in reading, created multiplication fact houses in math, and made land form changes pop-up books in science.

These activities are interesting enough to keep the kids focused on their work, and don't require them to be sitting still and following along with me. We did, how-ever, continue with regular routines for morning work, reading groups, math and writing warm-up assignments, and so on, to send the message **that this is a regular school day with regular expectations.**

The idea is that the kids don't notice a change in the way the day is run; only you as the teacher are aware of the subtle differences in the way content is presented and activities assigned.

5. Don't feel pressure to do all of the elaborate holiday stuff that other teachers do.

So what if the teacher across the hall covers her room in tinsel and lights and creates extensive holiday-themed centers which culminate in a life-size replica of the first North Pole expedition? Don't compare yourself, and don't wear yourself out trying to keep up. New teachers, especially, need to resist the urge to take on more than they can handle. Figure out some simple festive things you can do that won't create a lot of stress, and stick with those. You can always add a little more next year.

This advice goes double for buying students presents. Your teammate may choose to spend \$50 on trinkets, and that's fine. But you're not a bad teacher if you don't.

6. Keep the last day before break low-key.

Three hours before you pack up your whole family and make an eight hour trip to grandma's house is NOT the time to plan an elaborate fraction-review-gingerbread-house-decorating activity. You'll be distracted by your own holiday plans, the kids who actually show up to school will be too excited to follow directions, and you'll be running around like crazy to clean up so you can leave on time.

Instead, give meaningful work assignments that the kids will enjoy completing, and enjoy the last day together. This will also help you...





7. Get prepared for January before you leave.

Try to use the day before break to take down any seasonal decorations you have up, change the calendar, finalize your lesson plans and materials for the first day back, etc. There's nothing worse than coming back to work after a week off to discover silver glitter and unwritten thank you cards all over your desk. A new year is coming. **Give yourself a new start!**

The Holidays, School, & Trauma



Teachers need to be aware that the holidays can be extremely stressful for our students.

It's my FAVORITE TIME of the YEAR! Starting in November, I roll my birthday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas into one big celebration that doesn't stop until January 1. Growing up, I had happy memories of holidays – spending time with family, presents, shopping, baking, decorations, and SO MUCH food! All things that I love!

The holiday season can be a magical time for children and their families.

But sometimes, it's not.

Sometimes bringing family together causes verbal and/or physical fights. Sometimes parents indulge too much in alcohol or other substances when they're with their children, making their behavior unpredictable and frightening. Sometimes there isn't

money for presents or a special meal. Sometimes holiday breaks from school are filled with tension, stress, and unpredictability. The structure and [safety](#) of school are gone. Sometimes the expectations of the holiday season create immense disappointments for caregivers and their children. Sometimes there's sadness that loved ones aren't around to celebrate – possibly due to incarceration, divorce, abandonment, health issues, or death.

Just like that, the magic of the holiday is gone. It doesn't matter that every movie, TV show, Christmas song, commercial, or advertisement tells us that this is quite literally the most wonderful time of the year. For so many of our students, this time of year is miserable, and it's something they dread.

Does knowing this change what we, as teachers, do at school? Maybe.

Holiday Tips!



Here are two things to try to keep in mind this year as you finish out your lesson plans for the end of the year.

1. Be cautious asking students about their favorite present/holiday memory/tradition. Not all students get presents or have happy memories or family traditions. Sometimes they are just trying to survive the day. Other students might have really unhappy/triggering memories associated with holidays. Maybe Christmas Eve was the night that their parents got into a fight and split up. Maybe Thanksgiving is when they have to interact with that abusive family member. Maybe they did actually get Christmas presents, but they were sold or returned a week later because someone needed extra cash. These things happen way more often than we realize! We need to keep this in the back of our mind as we incorporate holiday activities into our classrooms.
2. Watch for changes in [behavior](#). Obviously most kids get excited around this time of year, which means that they might have trouble sitting still, or they might talk more in class. That's totally normal. Pay attention to the students who start acting out more – those who seem like they are deliberately misbehaving or the negative behaviors suddenly





seem to increase. Those are the students who might be feeling anxious (and not in a good way) about the upcoming holidays. Don't push them beyond what they can handle because they will probably not rise to meet your expectations. They literally won't be able to do it because their brains are putting them into survival mode as they anticipate the holidays and whatever stress that might bring into their lives. Any change in schedule, even due to class parties or fun programs, can also be stressful for these students because the safety of their structure and routine was thrown off. This can cause some students' brains to move into survival mode because they no longer feel safe.

Holiday Parties!

Don't hesitate to make the holidays a special time in your classroom! Sometimes it's the only safe, happy celebration that students get to participate in! Just remember to be aware that there are probably several (or many!) students in your classroom who don't get to have a happy holiday season. They might not talk about it. They might not be signed up for the Angel Tree project or the free turkey dinner, but their suffering is still very real to them.



Classroom gift exchanges or book exchanges are always fun but not all families have the money to participate in one, even if the budget is low. Christmas parties are super fun, but not all families have enough money to purchase treats to pass around. Or maybe they have enough money, but they don't have a parent who cares enough to go to the store for them. Or maybe they lived with food insecurity for a while, so even though they are now in a stable household, they ate all their treats on the way to school because their brains are constantly fearful that the food will run out.

It would be almost impossible to try to describe every possible scenario that your students might encounter over the holidays, but it IS possible for us, as teachers, to be aware that these kinds of things happen, even if they aren't talked about. I would probably bet that at least one student in every classroom across the country has encountered trauma during the holiday season.

It's a stressful time of year for so many families.

We need to be intentional in creating a supportive classroom that recognizes this trauma and supports students.

Nine Questions for a PLC Data Meeting

In this sidebar in *All Things PLC*, Robert Eaker and Janel Keating suggest an agenda for a grade-level teacher team looking at the results of an assessment given to all students. They suggest about five minutes for each item, with more time for two toward the end:

- What are the "power standards" or learning targets measured by this assessment?
- In what areas did our students do well?
- What instructional strategies helped our students do well?
- What skill deficiencies do we see?
- What patterns do we see in the mistakes, and what do they tell us?
- Which students did not master essential standards and which need additional time and support?
- What interventions will be provided to address unlearned skills, and how will we check for success? (20 minutes)
- Which students mastered standards and what is our plan for extending and enriching their learning? (10 minutes)
- Do we need to tweak or improve this assessment?

"Team Analysis of Common Formative Assessments" in *All Things PLC*, Fall 2019 (p. 35); these questions come from *Every School, Every Team, Every Classroom: District Leadership for Growing Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Robert Eaker and Janel Keating (Solution Tree, 2012)

