Dyslexia, Literacy, and South Dakota's Correctional Future

47% OF INMATES TESTED IN TWO MAXIMUM-SECURITY PRISONS HAD DYSLEXIA. [17]



Meet Ethan

He loves stories. Then reading becomes guessing. By third grade, humor and behavior hide his shame. By middle school, adults call him lazy. The wrong crowd offers belonging and a path toward court and incarceration.

Ethan is a composite. His intelligence never changed. The system missed how he needed to be taught.

A REAL OUTCOME

At 23, Ameer Baraka entered prison reading near a third-grade level. Testing finally named the barrier: dyslexia. With targeted help, he earned his GED and became an actor, author, mentor, and national advocate. [1]

THE TURNING POINT

"Dyslexia was a word I had never heard of until I was in prison." [1]

The intervention came decades late, but it still changed his direction.

THE COST

30%

entered prison without a high school credential [2]

56%

of U.S. prison inmates have only basic or below-basic reading skills.[18]

33%

lower odds of recidivism among incarcerated adults who participated in basic education. [4]

$650 MILLION

appropriated for South Dakota's 1,500-bed men's prison [5]

$34,039 A YEAR

average FY2025 cost to incarcerate one South Dakota adult [6]

BUILD MORE PRISONS -OR- BUILD MORE READERS

1 IN 5

persons show symptoms of dyslexia or are dyslexic [15]

HOW WE IMPROVE OUTCOMES

A practical agenda to disrupt pathways to prison, reduce recidivism, identify the one in five early, provide effective education, and maintain accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

REDUCE RECIDIVISM

RECOMMENDATION 1:

IDENTIFY AND SERVE INMATES

Within three months of intake, assess the reading level of every incarcerated individual serving a sentence of one year or more. Any individual who reads below a sixth grade level will receive an intervention plan using evidence-based methods, such as Structured Linguistic Literacy. Offer meaningful incentives for participating in the plan, reaching the minimum reading level, and pursuing further educational opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

ENSURE COMPLIANCE

Establish a joint committee of the Department of Education and the Department of Corrections to oversee implementation, report outcomes publicly, and recommend changes as needed.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

TRAINING

Make dyslexia identification and evidence-based instruction a required part of every South Dakota educator preparation program and of license renewal. Staff every state prison with trained dyslexia specialists who assess individuals and provide targeted literacy instruction.

REDUCE THE PATH TO PRISON

RECOMMENDATION 4:

SCREEN, DIAGNOSE AND SERVE

Require every incoming first grader to complete an approved dyslexia-risk screening. Establish a statewide diagnostic standard for schools to follow when a student shows signs of dyslexia. Every student identified with dyslexia will receive an individualized tutoring plan grounded in structured literacy, including Orton-Gillingham practices. The goal of each plan is for the student to reach reading fluency, rate, accuracy, and comprehension on par with their peers.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

ENHANCE OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Build on South Dakota's DOE's existing literacy plan by enhancing statewide support and oversight to ensure schools are effectively teaching reading, identifying struggling students, and providing appropriate interventions. Require regular monitoring, measurable progress, and reliable funding for all districts.

PROOF SYSTEMS CAN MOVE & IMPROVE

MISSISSIPPI

52% INCREASE

in grade 4 reading proficiency, 2013-2024 [7-9]

82% LOWER

youth arrest rate, 2000-2020 [10]

Mississippi paired screening with teacher training, coaches, intervention, and accountability.

LOUISIANA

50th to 16th

grade 4 reading rank, 2019-2024

Louisiana aligned law, teacher training, student support, and family engagement around research-based literacy. [11]

ALL K-3

screen, identify and intervene

Louisiana requires K-3 universal reading screening three times annually, with required Individual Reading Improvement Plans within 30 days for students identified below grade level. Required dyslexia screener [16]

SOURCES

1 U.S. Senate testimony of Ameer Baraka
2 NCES 2014 PIAAC prison study
4 National Institute of Justice CrimeSolutions summary
5 South Dakota 2025 Special Session SB 2
6 South Dakota DOC FY2025 report
7 NCES NAEP Mississippi profile
8 Mississippi 2015-16 report
9 Spencer 2024 Mississippi policy study
10 Only Young Once Mississippi youth report
11 Louisiana Department of Education NAEP results
13 Stevens 2021 Orton-Gillingham review
14 Jacob 2017 randomized EBLI evaluation
15 International Dyslexia Association FAQ
16 Louisiana annual K-3 screening requirements (2023)
17. ERIC, Dyslexia in Incarcerated Men and Women (2021).
18. National Center for Education Statistics, Literacy Behind Bars