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Shades of controversy The Boston Globe

With Irlen reading aid, some see better; others see a sham

By Jessica T. Lee, Globe Correspondent | August 15, 2004

Massachusetts, to the dismay of some researchers, has given teachers new tools for boosting reading scores: plastic sheets and colored lenses that children put on top of their books so they can make out the words better.

Last spring, in a statewide update sent to school leaders, Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll listed the treatment, known as the Irlen Method, as a way to improve reading scores.

But doctors who study reading disabilities say they're not convinced the Irlen treatment makes a difference, or that the syndrome it's meant to fix even exists.

Irlen syndrome is a visual perception disorder that affects approximately 12 to 15 percent of the general population and about 50 percent of people with reading problems, according to the Irlen Institute. Helen L. Irlen, an educational psychologist for whom the syndrome is named, said her colored glasses work by filtering out distracting visual information and therefore allowing people to better focus on the words.

"Any serious research that has been carried out in this area has failed to show an effect," said Dr. Eli Peli, a low-vision specialist at the Schepens Eye Research Institute. "I think there's nothing to justify it."

Department of Education spokeswoman Heidi Perlman said state officials were not aware there was anything controversial about the technique when they passed on the information.

After seeing the memo, the Marshfield school system spent nearly \$12,000 to send 19 teachers through a two-day training session to screen for problems that might be helped with the Irlen overlays. The Massachusetts Literacy Project, a nonprofit created to promote Irlen treatment in the state, spent two days showing the teachers how to spot children who might be helped and how to choose the proper color overlay, each of which costs between \$2 and \$3.50.

Anything that promises to help students read better and get them out of costly special- education programs has appealed to school systems. A California school district saved more than \$800,000 a year after introducing the overlays in 1989. The Massachusetts education department expects to

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save money in the long run by screening for Irlen's and moving children out of costly special-education programs. Every student mainstreamed out of special education saves the state \$6,700 a year.

Dozens of so-called quick fixes have emerged to treat learning disorders, from eating fish oils to the DORE program, which prescribes individualized exercise regimens for \$3,000 each. When doctors and educators can't agree on what actually works, parents must remain vigilant about what their children are being tested for and why, said National PTA president Linda Hodge.

"The number one thing is that parents should not be afraid to ask questions and keep asking questions," Hodge said. She said that parents should start with the teacher, and go to the school district if "you're not getting what you need."

Marshfield assistant superintendent Middleton K. McGoodwin said that he, too, was not aware of any controversy surrounding the Irlen Method; he said that his main interest was to provide the faculty with a new resource.

Some doctors, such as Peli, believe that the Irlen Method system is just an illustration of the gap between scientific research and the education community. Special-education teachers to this day continue to put yellow transparencies over reading materials because it has helped visually impaired students, Peli said. Decades ago, the photocopy machine's predecessor, the mimeograph, printed blue ink, and the yellow filter would make the words appear black. Now, copy machines produce black print, yet some teachers still use the yellow transparencies, Peli said.

More than 20 years ago, Irlen discovered that she could help people with reading disorders by putting colored filters over their books, or getting them to wear glasses with colored lenses. Irlen began selling glasses and filters, and training to show teachers how to help students with what became known as "Irlen syndrome."

In Massachusetts, if teachers are trained, children can be screened in school for free. To get the glasses, students would need to go to the Irlen Center in Medford. The center's executive director, Georgianna Saba, estimates that lenses cost \$485 to \$700 in consulting, lab, and lens fees.

Today, approximately 96,000 people worldwide use Irlen filters and more than 3,000 US school districts screen for the disorder, according to the for-profit Irlen Institute, which estimates that roughly half the people with reading disorders could be helped by the Irlen Method. Alabama has even classified Irlen syndrome as a learning disability.

There's plenty of anecdotal evidence that the Irlen overlays work. But critics of Irlen say that there has been no scientific study of the effectiveness of the Irlen treatment.

"I certainly don't think I would call it 'Irlen syndrome,' " said Dr. John J. Ratey, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist who specializes in attention deficit disorders. He thinks Irlen has grossly overestimated the number of people who can be helped by colored glasses and overlays.

"I think that's a scam," Ratey said. She is "not only bilking a lot of people, but she's giving people hope of an easy fix when a lot of times there is none."

Irlen said her colored glasses work by filtering out distracting visual information and allowing people to better focus on the words.

Mary Williams-Brewer, a psychology professor at the University of New Orleans, said that red and blue overlays can improve reading skills for some,

but said it's impossible to tell whether it works simply by asking a child.

In one study, Williams-Brewer said she asked children which colors they thought helped them read better, and came up with a surprising result: More children picked their mother's favorite color than the color that actually helped them read better.

In 1998, Massachusetts funded a pilot project in the Pioneer Valley to screen for Irlen syndrome. Of the 172 students screened, 30 were diagnosed with the disorder. After using colored overlays for several months, some of them were able to read at their grade level for the first time. An earlier study in Acushnet moved half of the special education students using Irlen filters into regular education.

Irlen critics don't take stock in those studies because they believe the samples are too small, and the study designs are flawed.

State Representative Michael J. Rodrigues, Democrat of Westport, has supported the Irlen treatment since first hearing about it in 1996. He has sponsored a House bill every year since then to require each school district in the state to screen for Irlen syndrome.

"I'm interested in helping the kids," Rodrigues said. "If we can fix it with something as simple as an 89-cent color overlay, we should."

The Irlen approach seems to work for 8-year-old Anthony Amatucci, who could see only spots and blurs when he looked at a book a year ago. He and his mother say his problem has been solved by green-tinted nonprescription glasses.

"The glasses make me see better with reading," said Anthony, who is entering third grade at Old Colony Montessori School in Hingham, and enjoys reading the Droon fantasy series.

Anthony's grandmother, Barbara Romano, screened him for Irlen's when Anthony first started rubbing at pages to get rid of the smudging effect he saw. Romano is not just a screener; she also sports purple Irlen filters.

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