

**Testimony of Shelley Hartford
Before the House Ways and Means Committee**

**In Support of HB1255
Education - Dual Language Learner Pre-Kindergarten Grant Program**

**March 6, 2020
1:00pm**

Good Afternoon. I am here today on behalf of Anne Arundel County Public Schools to offer support for HB1255, the Expanding Bilingual Learner Prekindergarten Grant Program.

My name is Shelley Hartford. I am the Coordinator of the AACPS Office of English Language Acquisition. As such, I supervise ESOL instruction for over 7,000 English Learners. The majority of children identified as English Learners in Anne Arundel County are in grades K-2.

Dual language learners arrive at school with oral fluency in a home language that is different from the instructional language of school. As they enter Pre-K, students are taught literacy skills in this new language-English. However, literacy skills are most efficiently and effectively developed in the language spoken by the learner. This means children who speak Spanish will learn to read more easily in Spanish than in English. Literacy skills are transferrable across languages. This means that, for example, a Spanish-speaking child who learns to read in Spanish will naturally apply their reading skills to their second language, English.

Spanish literacy development does not impede English literacy development, it supports it. As a dual language learner grasps the concept that letters represent sounds, and sounds make words, they will apply this knowledge to all printed languages they encounter. The research is clear, teaching a child to read in Spanish strengthens their reading performance in English.

In AACPS, we have begun to address the needs of dual language learners through the integration of Spanish literacy instruction in Pre-K. Using a combination of local and federal grant funding, my office has purchased materials and training on a Spanish literacy enrichment program. We have hired 11 Bilingual Teacher Assistants to provide small group foundational literacy in Spanish. The response from parents, children, and educators to this new bilingual support in pre-K has been overwhelmingly positive. Principals who have heard about these bilingual supports are calling me to request the same support in their schools.

In conclusion, bilingual education is perhaps the best-kept secret in public education. Nation-wide, schools with high-quality dual-language programs have been proven to fully close the achievement gap for diverse student groups. HB 1255 provides schools with the financial support required to expand their capacity to meet the language and literacy needs of dual language learners. I implore you to embrace their potential through your support of this bill.