



Cardinal Reading Strategies

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RE: HB1375 (Vision for Maryland Program)

Delegate Hill,

My name is Dr. Walter Dunson. I am the Executive Director of Cardinal Reading Strategies, an adjunct professor in the graduate school of education for a local university, the author of *“School Success for Kids with Dyslexia and Other Reading Difficulties*, and a member of the Maryland State Department of Education Elementary Literacy Work Group. I am writing this letter in support of HB1375, the Vision for Maryland Program.

According to the latest PARCC Assessment, 63% of Maryland 4th graders read below the level of “proficient”, indicating that they read on the “basic” level. The “basic” level means:

- Students demonstrate a severe lack of performance/a limited performance
- Students possess little or flawed understanding/partial, rudimentary understanding
- Students are unable to answer simple questions about the text
- Students are unable to accurately decode the passage/or they are barely able to finish the passage
- Students possess limited knowledge of author’s purpose, etc.

There has long been a correlation between 4th grade reading scores and 12th grade reading scores. Essentially, if we don’t catch them by 4th grade, we won’t catch them. Thanks to the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), we have been able to track the scores of students who were

in the 4th grade in 2007, and who were in the 12th grade at the end of last year. We can compare their scores. In 2007, we had 33% who read on the proficient level or above, while 67% were on the basic level. Compare that to the same students 8 years later. 37% were reading on the proficient level or above, while 63% were reading on the basic level. As a result, nationally we have:

- 83% of African-American 12th graders are Below Proficient
- 78% of Hispanic-American 12th graders are Below Proficient
- 71% of Native-Americans 12th graders are Below Proficient
- 51% of Asian-American 12th graders are Below Proficient
- 54% of European-American 12th graders are Below Proficient
- 63% of all graduating American 12th graders are Below Proficient

And it is getting worse. Score-point changes between 2017 and 2019 for fourth-grade public school students assessed in NAEP (National Association of Educational Progress) reading, by state/jurisdiction indicates that the state of Maryland had the highest point change in the country. In 2017, we had 60% of fourth-grade students reading below the level of Proficient. In 2019, the number of students reading below the level of Proficient rose to 65%.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, within Maryland, specifically, if 65% of Maryland 4th graders read below the level of “proficient”, we may quickly ascertain how many 4th graders read on the level of “proficient”....35%. Of this 35%, 51% of those who read on the “proficient” level were White. Only 18% were Black students. 21% of “proficient” readers are Hispanic. This represents a huge performance gap, especially considering that 59.3% of students within Maryland’s public schools are minorities....nearly 6 out of 10. Clearly, in our current educational model of reading, minority students are being negatively affected more than their White peers.

Tremendous gains have been made within the past few years in terms of what we know about the reading science and how the brain responds to literacy instruction. First and foremost, reading is an activity that relies upon visual processing. In order to read, a student must be able to translate the written symbol to the corresponding sound that it represents. Reading, or decoding, involves sound-symbol correspondence, which is not a naturally occurring process. This is supported by the fact that there are two key components of

reading: word identification and concept imagery. **Word identification** involves recognizing that words are a systematic string of individual graphemes (letters). Each individual sequential combination represents a different word. Students must be able to string together the individual phonemes (sounds) that are represented by the graphemes in order to produce these words. This is the essence of decoding. Students who have weak word identification skills (word attack) will stumble and stammer as they clumsily attempt to read the printed language, producing errors in identification and pronunciation along the way. This deficit restrains the student's ability to pull meaning from print, as the other half of the reading puzzle, concept imagery, involves comprehension of the meanings behind the sequential combinations of letters (words). **Concept imagery** is the ability to form an image in the "mind's eye" based solely upon sensory input, whether visual, auditory, or tactile-kinesthetic. It represents the ability to take the next logical step towards comprehension. This process allows students to visualize the item or process represented by the printed words, and it relies solely upon the accurate identification and pronunciation of the sequential strings of graphemes and phonemes presented. Without word identification skills, a student will not understand what was read. The beginning of this complex activity is the ability to see clearly.

HB1375 ensures that all students can see clearly, ensures that visual processing is not an issue in the decoding process, and ensures that identified students are able to receive eye examinations and, if necessary, eyeglasses.

Thank you for your time, and I encourage a favorable report on this issue.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Walter E. Dunson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "W".

Walter E. Dunson, PhD
Executive Director
Cardinal Reading Strategies

