

Testimony to the Senate *Education, Health, Environment Affairs Committee*
In Support of Senate Bill 126
State Department of Education-Early Literacy and Dyslexia Practices-Guidance and Assistance
Stephanie Carr: Decoding Dyslexia Maryland
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My name is Stephanie Carr, and I am a former high school general education teacher, current Co-Chair of Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee for Howard County, one of five founding members of the Decoding Dyslexia Howard County Chapter, and most importantly a parent to three children with disabilities who all share dyslexia. I am writing in support of Senate Bill 126 which would result in the creation of a Reading and Dyslexia Handbook that would provide much needed guidance to the local school districts of Maryland on changing the long-term practices of reading and literacy instruction that have not provided all children with the basic ability to read.

Reading is at the epicenter of education. Without the ability to auditorily process appropriate sounds in pre-kindergarten; without the ability to sound out words due to circumstances or lack of appropriate first instruction; without the ability to grasp the multitude of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and language rules of the English Language; students will be sent down a path of compounding academic difficulties that leads to low academic achievement and a range of mental health effects that creates a lifelong trajectory of socio-economic outcomes that crosses multiple generations.

As a former high school general education teacher from Baltimore City and Anne Arundel County, I experienced firsthand the damage that inappropriate core instruction at the elementary level inflicts, how the lack of evidence-based interventions was unable to remediate the skills students did not have, and the inability for students to comprehend curriculum required to graduate. By the time a student enters ninth grade, the gap between a students' grade level and their academic ability had grown so wide that the focus is not on the long-term effects of the inability to read proficiently but on passing standardized tests and graduating on time. Fortunately protocols to combat these practices will be outlined with the passage of the Reading and Dyslexia Handbook bill. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) will be providing local districts guidelines to provide evidence-based interventions for students through twelfth grade. Local school districts will be responsible for providing appropriate core instruction and a system of reading supports from pre-kindergarten through high school which enables students to receive help in the appropriate skill deficit regardless of grade. The handbook will be a resource for general educators on the definitions and characteristics of reading difficulties, dyslexia, and dysgraphia.

Between my educational background, personal experience in the system, a parent of children with different disabilities, and as Co-Chair of SECAC in Howard County, I have worked with a multitude of parents across three Maryland counties since 2016. Every single child I have been involved with has had reading struggles. Many of those students are identified with an SLD in Reading/Dyslexia, along with co-morbid disabilities of Dysgraphia and ADHD. While each student's IEP is different, one problem is obvious, the student, while making progress on their IEP goals, is not closing the achievement gap and unable to meet grade-level

standards. Each school has its own culture, and the lack of specific guidelines regarding reading has caused inconsistency in identification, remediation, and what is considered best practices for reading instruction. The Handbook bill will provide a much-needed outline for consistency and best practices involving screening for reading difficulties, literacy and reading instruction, interventions, accommodations, and even specially designed instruction for students identified with a Specific Learning Disability in Reading/Dyslexia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment that students who struggle academically will have regressed and suffered a loss of learning. Students with reading struggles and/or disabilities, along with other vulnerable populations are doubly impacted as they cannot receive the in-person teaching that is so critical to make progress, and they are struggling to access the online instruction due to their circumstances. Many students do not have the ability to read the online presentation and follow multiple step processes necessary to learn in the current technological environment. The passage of the Reading and Dyslexia Handbook bill will offer direction in dealing with learning loss by providing guidance for screening protocols, evidence-based interventions, and specially designed instruction.

As a parent of three children with dyslexia who have been identified at three different times in their educational career, I have watched my children suffer both academically and emotionally. The emotional toil of not being able to read as well as their peers was equally as devastating as the academic struggles. As many as 20 percent of children with dyslexia also suffer from depression and another 20 percent suffer from an anxiety disorder (<http://www.dyslexiaidx.com/articles-unlocking.php>). Having a handbook to aid educators in identifying and intervening during the early years of education, possibly avoiding the adverse mental health consequences for struggling readers and children with dyslexia.

In Maryland pre-pandemic, only 41% of students are meeting grade level standards in reading and writing as measured by the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) scores in English Language Arts for third grade. Lack of proficient reading is one of the primary causes of the achievement gap for marginalized students. Roughly 11% of students with special needs are meeting proficiency standards. English Language Learners are slightly better at 13.7%. Around 27% of African American and Hispanic students are meeting grade level standards with students receiving Free and Reduced Meals are at 23% (<https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/>). Studies show that “[a]bout 16% of children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade do not graduate from high school on time--a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers.” [Hernandez, Donald J., Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011](#). Without early identification, evidence-based reading instruction, and intensive interventions, the difference between good and struggling readers only widens over time.

Twenty-three states, including Texas, California and New Jersey, have Early Literacy and Dyslexia handbooks that guide implementation of their state literacy requirements. Senate Bill 126 would create a stakeholder advisory group charged with developing a handbook with the following components:

1. Definitions, indicators and characteristics of reading difficulties, dyslexia, and dysgraphia
2. Best practices for reading screening, identification of reading difficulties, instruction, and assessment and interventions for dyslexia
3. Helpful tools and materials to support teachers and parents; and
4. Designation of a dyslexia liaison at MSDE who would facilitate technical assistance to local school systems.

Senate Bill 126 is a cost-effective way to bring Maryland schools into alignment with the research on how students learn to read. While the fiscal note indicates that MSDE will need an additional position to support the dyslexia liaison role, the bill clearly states that MSDE is able to appoint an existing member of its staff to perform these duties along with current responsibilities. In July of 2020, Dr. Karen Salmon, State Superintendent, sent a letter to Delegate Luedtke that stated, “Although we are not able to add another position to our staff at this time, I’m pleased to say that our English Language Arts (ELA) Coordinator possesses many of the necessary skills and knowledge to provide those supports to our educator.” An individual has already been identified who can fulfill this role. Dr. Salmon also stated that this position was already working on guidance to implement the Ready to Read Act and had created a stakeholder focus group “to elevate high-quality and evidence-based literacy.” This bill would merely expand and formalize the work that MSDE has already begun. The bill reduces the certification requirement of the liaison from a Dyslexia Specialist to a Dyslexia Interventionist because an interventionist does not require the MSDE employee to be actively working with students. The liaison will be given eighteen (18) months to obtain the certification if the individual is not already certified. It is our belief that the fiscal note overestimates the cost and that this bill will be cost neutral and result in long-term savings by reducing special education costs by addressing reading challenges in the general education setting through evidence-based core instruction and multiple-tiered systems of support.

This bill makes no attempt to interfere with local school districts’ ability to decide on specific interventions and instructional materials. Rather, it will provide a one stop shop of resources for improving student outcomes in reading and providing best practices for helping children with dyslexia. The resources, materials, and information laid out in the Handbook will help guide administrators, educators, and parents on standards, instruction, and practices to be used in and out of the classroom. This handbook was recommended by the Legislature’s Dyslexia Task Force, which found that parents and experts had trouble getting educators to recognize dyslexia and provide appropriate instruction and interventions to remediate students with dyslexia.

There can be no doubt that this guidance is needed when approximately 55-60% of all children are not meeting grade-level expectations on the MCAP ELA exam across all tested grades (<https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/>). The academic effects of the COVID pandemic are already present and recovering the learning loss will be insurmountable without additional

support for educators on appropriate instruction and interventions for struggling readers and students with dyslexia. This Handbook also supports the implementation of the Ready to Read Act and will guide school systems on collecting data from the screener and align supplemental reading instruction and interventions to students' areas of need. The handbook will give school districts guidance and shine a light on practices that support struggling students *to help prevent and close academic gaps*.

I urge a favorable report from the Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee and for the Senate to pass Senate Bill 126 to create a Reading and Dyslexia Handbook Bill in order to support the local school systems in the endeavor of teaching reading to ALL children.