

**Testimony to the Senate *Education, Health & Environmental Affairs* Committee
In Support of Senate Bill 126
State Department of Education -
Early Literacy and Dyslexia Practices - Guidance and Assistance**

**Erin Parker, Decoding Dyslexia Maryland
January 27, 2021**

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

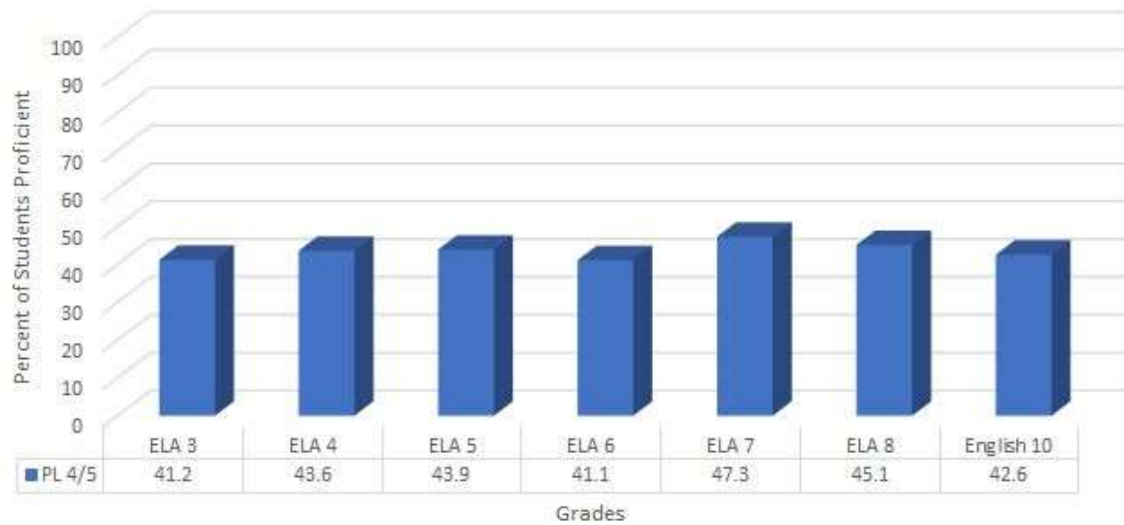
My name is Erin Parker, and I have a ten year old son with dyslexia. I am a chapter leader for Decoding Dyslexia Maryland, which represents parents, students, and educators across Maryland and has 14 local chapters with active members in each school district. I am submitting this written testimony in support of Senate Bill 126 to create a Reading and Dyslexia Handbook.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation found 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.](#)

Struggling readers do not "catch up" to their average performing peers unless evidence-based reading instruction and early, intensive intervention is provided; otherwise, the gap between good and poor readers only widens over time. *See generally*, Adams, M. *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print.*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, National Research Council report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, 1998); Stanovich, K. E., *Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy*, Reading Research Quarterly, 21, 360-406, 1986.

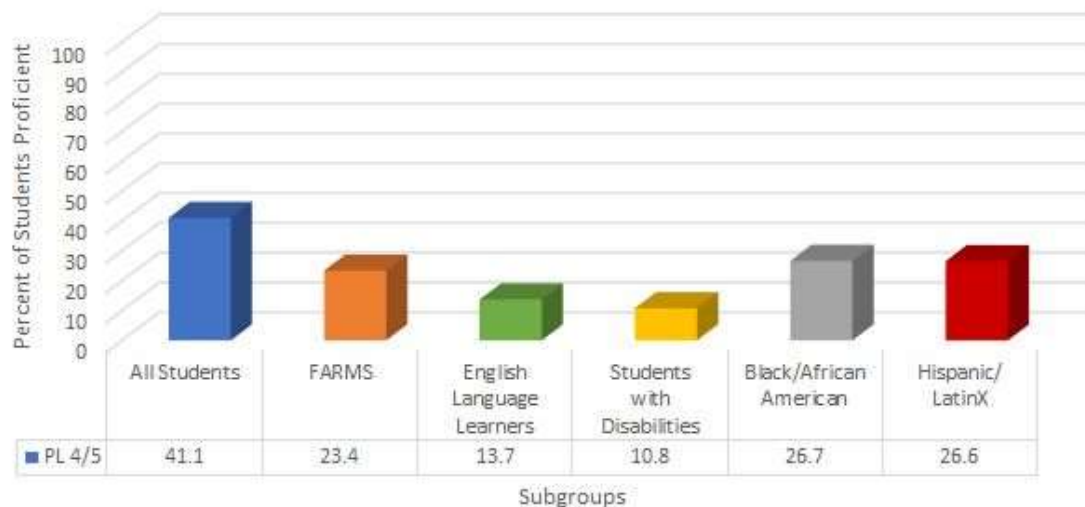
Across the country, approximately one-third of students read below the basic reading level, one-third read at the basic reading level, which is not proficient, and only one-third of students are reading at grade level. Here, in Maryland, across all grade levels only 40-45% of students are **proficient** in reading and writing as measured by the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) scores in English Language Arts:

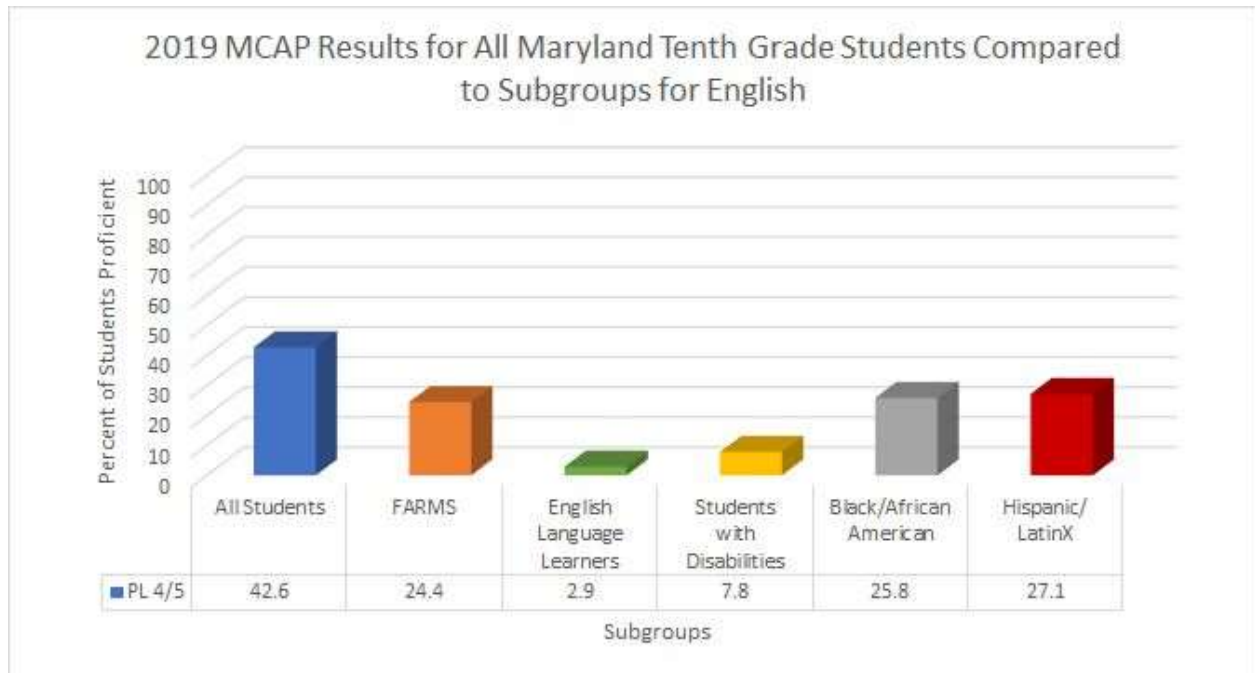
2019 MCAP Results for All Maryland Students by Grade
for English Language Arts



Lack of proficient reading is one of the primary causes of the achievement gap for marginalized students, including students of color, students with disabilities, students receiving Free and Reduced Meals, and students who are English language learners. When you look at the statistics for subgroups, the reading and writing outcomes are even worse:

2019 MCAP Results for All Maryland Third Grade Students Compared
to Subgroups for English Language Arts





These statistics are from 2019 ***before the pandemic hit***. The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be immeasurable. Learning loss suffered by our children could span from falling a few months behind to several years behind in reading. Students who likely would have learned to read without issue without the pandemic are predicted to fall behind.

The [2015 Dyslexia Task Force](#) found that local school system administrators, educators, and parents of K-12 students would benefit from a handbook that includes best practices for reading and dyslexia along with materials and processes to support general educators in the classrooms. See p. 51-52. This bill is proposed to adopt the Task Force recommendation and would bring together classroom teachers, special educators, administrators, and parents to develop a comprehensive resource that would establish a common language and terminology for teaching reading and students with dyslexia. The handbook envisioned by this bill will provide a roadmap for how to help children to recover from learning loss whether caused by the pandemic, poverty or disabilities, using the best evidenced-based methodologies to teach reading.

SB 126 would create a stakeholder advisory group charged with developing a handbook, including the following components:

1. Definitions, indicators and characteristics of reading difficulties;
2. Best practices for reading screening, identification of reading difficulties, instruction, and dyslexia assessment and interventions;
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.

23 states, including Texas, California and New Jersey, have Early Literacy and Dyslexia handbooks that guide implementation of their state literacy requirements.

In December 2019, the findings from the [Wested special education study](#) noted that while students with disabilities required both general and specialized instruction, MSDE's guidance to special educators did not appear to be distributed to general educators. See p. 39. In order to reduce the cost of special education, guidance on best practices for reading instruction in the general education curriculum is imperative. A handbook, which has been vetted by an advisory group of stakeholders from various perspectives, can be used by administrators, general educators and special educators to work collaboratively to reduce the number of students who are failed by ineffective core reading instruction. Further, core reading instruction can be aligned to specialized instruction and interventions.

Students who are helped most by effective core reading instruction are students living in poverty, English language learners, students who experience trauma, and students who are at risk for reading disabilities, like dyslexia. These students and their parents rely on schools to provide effective, evidence-based instruction and intervention frameworks, and the handbook would help schools accomplish this goal. The handbook would collect and make available to all educators, best practices that address reading and dyslexia. It will shine a light on practices that support struggling students to ***prevent and close academic gaps***.

A handbook would also support improved student outcomes by connecting general and special education departments, not only to best practices, ***but to each other***. While the bill does not mandate a specific curriculum or program, it encourages inter-professional practices where educators can learn about, from and with each other to enable effective collaboration and improve outcomes for students. The bill would not interfere with local control, as school districts would still select their own curriculum, but the handbook would provide guidance on evidence-based practices that could help school systems to analyze and adopt curriculum that better aligns to the research. The handbook is a necessary corollary to the Ready to Read Act and will help support its implementation but including best practices on screening and explaining how to use screening data to drive instruction and intervention that is targeted to the needs identified by the screening tool.

Last year, the House considered similar legislation, which was passed unanimously. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced the closure of the legislature prior to the Senate vote. This year, we have clarified the membership of the stakeholder advisory group. We have further clarified that the MSDE liaison does not require the creation of a new position at MSDE; rather, MSDE may choose to incorporate the liaison responsibilities into an existing position, if preferable. Now, more than ever, we need to provide guidance on best practices in reading. The handbook that will result from the passage of SB 126 is a cost-effective way to improve student learning outcomes in reading and help all struggling readers, including children with dyslexia. We urge a favorable report on the bill and thank you for your consideration.