

KATIE FRY HESTER
Legislative District 9
Carroll and Howard Counties

Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

January 27th, 2021

Sponsor Testimony in Favor of Senate 126 - Early Literacy and Dyslexia Practices - Guidance and Assistance

Position: Favorable

Chairman Pinsky, Vice chair Kagan, members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 126. Over the past several months, each and every one of us has heard from our constituents about the challenges our students have been facing in a primarily virtual environment. Just last week, we heard from local Superintendents around the State who described falling test scores and serious educational impacts of the learning loss caused by COVID-19. This is especially true for our students with early literacy challenges and dyslexia, for whom the impacts of this loss of instructional time only compound the pre-existing challenges they have faced and will continue to face over the course of their educational careers. While our parents and educators continue to search for answers on how to close the learning gap for some of our most vulnerable students, the State has an opportunity and responsibility to support those efforts through the end of the pandemic and into the future, to generate better lifelong outcomes for our children with early literacy difficulties and dyslexia.

This bill allows us to do just that, creating a stakeholder advisory group, including educators and members of the dyslexia community, to collaborate on the creation of a Reading and Dyslexia Handbook and a central repository of tools and materials that address the needs of at-risk and struggling readers and students with dyslexia. This would provide a set of powerful, evidence-based resources for parents, teachers, and local school systems working to ensure our children with dyslexia and early literacy challenges are successful throughout their educational careers. The Handbook would include:

1. Evidence-based best practices for reading screening, identification of reading difficulties, comprehensive literacy instruction, and other specifically designed instructions or interventions;
2. Definitions, indicators, and characteristics of reading difficulties, dyslexia, and dysgraphia;
3. Recommendations for student accommodations, including assistive technology, and methods of parent engagement and communication;

After development, the handbook would be disseminated through each local school system's social media sites, professional learning channels, and other modes of communication for parents and educators. Additionally, this legislation requires the Department of Education designate a dyslexia liaison within the Department to assist local school systems in implementing professional development opportunities and other forms of technical assistance, designed based on the contents of the Reading and Dyslexia Handbook. This bill was a recommendation of the Maryland Dyslexia Task Force in 2015. It also follows a model laid out by 23 other states, including Texas, California, and New Jersey, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to create a comprehensive resource on reading and dyslexia.

Research has shown that effective early intervention can be the key to closing the educational gaps experienced by children with dyslexia and reading difficulties. At a young age, the brain is highly plastic and will adapt to the right sets of training and practices - so much so that a 2014 meta-analysis showed that up to 70 percent of at-risk children who receive educational intervention in kindergarten or first grade went on to become entirely proficient readers. This bill will make sure that these best practices reach the hands of our parents and teachers, and are based on sound scientific evidence while simultaneously incorporating the real world experience of teachers and advocates who have spent countless hours of their professional and personal lives on this important issue. With this legislation, we have an opportunity to help our community members identify children with reading difficulties earlier in life, and implement more effective interventions following identification. **For those reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report for SB126.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Carroll Counties