

January 25, 2021

To Whom it may concern,

I am writing to ask that you support the Reading and Dyslexia Handbook legislation [SB 126 & HB 0237](#) sponsored by Senator Katie Fry Hester and Sen. Craig Zucker in the Senate and sponsored by Delegate Eric Ebersole in the House.

I am the Reading Specialist at Gaithersburg Elementary in Montgomery County Public Schools. I have worked in this school for 20 years. Gaithersburg is a Title I school that serves a very special population of nearly 900 students. 80% of our students are Hispanic and speak Spanish at home. Most come from immigrant families. 15% of our families are black. Our school's demographics also include 80% FARMS and we have about 20% mobility. Many of our students have experienced interrupted education either because of housing instability, visits back to their home countries or from lack of access to education in the countries from which they came in Central America.

Gaithersburg has a unique Bilingual Biliteracy program in K-3. We began this program in kindergarten four years ago and plan to expand to fourth grade next year. This program was created in response to the research that children learn to read best in their native language. Our BB program serves native Spanish speakers. These students learn in classrooms in Spanish and English 50% of their instructional time in all content areas. We build their L1 and foundational skills, using the phonology they know best, while introducing English and teach them the same foundational skills in English.

Gaithersburg ES has been responding to the body of research called the Science of Reading since 2015. This initiative was driven by the leaders inside the school building who continue to study the research that supports the best way to develop literacy skills in all children. Each year, we provide more PD to the teachers and staff while implementing new programs that move us away from ineffective balanced literacy practices and move us more toward a code-emphasis curriculum.

Those who know the field know that early identification of dyslexia is powerful and has the best chance of remediation against reading failure. The population I serve at Gaithersburg is at great risk for being missed. All of our district assessments and screeners are in English. Most

of my kindergarten and first grade students fail these assessments and screeners, therefore masking any real red flags for dyslexia. These screeners measure a little phonemic awareness and a little phonics, but they do not truly screen for dyslexia. Most of the students with dyslexia in my building are not identified until the third-fifth grade, after years of intervention instruction, because too many exclusionary factors get in the way. Yes, my population of students come from backgrounds that challenge our assessment systems. Many don't speak English. Many have had interrupted instruction. Does that mean that they should wait until the fifth grade to be identified with dyslexia? We do our best to provide intervention instruction for many students every year who are not officially identified and we are trying very hard to provide Tier 1 instruction for all students that should keep more students away from reading failure. Marginalized populations like mine at GES, in schools that don't know the science, are struggling even more to obtain the recognition and instruction that they desperately need.

The Maryland Reading and Dyslexia Handbook is essential to streamline the process to identify all students at risk early enough to provide appropriate and science supported instruction. In the RS role at my school, I am working with my Special Education team to understand dyslexia, learn how to identify it (regardless of language) and write appropriate and effective IEPs goals. This is happening in my building because I have studied dyslexia and the Science of Reading on my own. My district is not providing guidance or education. Our psychologists and special education teachers are not being trained by the district. A handbook would educate districts and parents about what they can and should expect. A handbook will help ensure that IEPs for those with dyslexia are written and carried out effectively. A handbook would hold all schools accountable for the work that provides equitable literacy education for all students.

Early identification and early intervention is critical. The absence of both is malpractice. Tier 1 instruction that is responsive to the Science of Reading is also essential. Balanced Literacy is malpractice. A handbook will put all districts in Maryland on common ground with common goals and streamlined approaches to reducing reading failure for all students, early identification of dyslexia and the sound instructional approaches to teaching students with dyslexia. Professional development would be streamlined as well. Teacher knowledge and capacity is the most powerful tool our state has to fight this dismal illiteracy pandemic that is happening in our state and around the country.

Please support this handbook. Not every school has someone in it doing the study of Dyslexia and the Science of Reading on their own. For me, the work is even harder because the tools

provided to me by the district (PD, curriculum and assessment tools), are not aligned with the science. The state should be driving the work toward effective literacy instruction for all, early identification, along with appropriate and effective intervention instruction for students with dyslexia, dysgraphia and OWL LD. Teachers want to learn. They want to be effective. A handbook is a first step toward that goal.

Please support the adoption of this handbook. Maryland children need sound and consistent literacy programming. Maryland children with dyslexia need to be identified in K-1, regardless of their backgrounds. Maryland children with dyslexia deserve free and appropriate intervention instruction. All Maryland children deserve the chance to be literate citizens.

Thank you,

Laura Hankins

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