

January 27, 2021

The Honorable Senator Paul Pinsky, Chair
Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Senate Bill 126 – Support with amendment

Dear Senator Pinsky and members of the Committee.

My name is Dr. William Flook, and I am speaking on behalf of the Maryland Psychological Association, in support of the bill before you today. I am a licensed psychologist with over fifty years in service to public education, including work in three Maryland public school systems and at the Maryland State Department of Education.

My service has been largely focused on students with learning and behavioral challenges. For our schools to be able to address these challenges, and to help our students to learn and to grow, several things are necessary:

- It is essential to understand the problem – school staff need knowledge.
- It is critically important to identify problems early – school staff need to know what to look for.
- It is just as important to know what to do, and to be able to do it – school staff need training and experience in effective, evidence-based interventions.
- And schools need to have in place tiered systems of student support to manage the process, measure its outcomes, and make adjustments as needed.

So when we think about this in terms of the critically important life skill of literacy, all of these elements need to be in place for children who are struggling with reading. Historically we have seen a significant lack of knowledge and expertise among public school teachers and support staff regarding the early identification of reading problems, and what to do about them. And we have seen a growing recognition of the need to improve our identification of children struggling with early reading, and of providing them with evidence-based supports. Many Maryland school systems have worked to improve their focus on this area in

recent years – I can cite the Baltimore County Public Schools and the Kent County Public Schools from my own experiences there.

The Maryland State Department of Education has a most important role to play in all this. To its credit, MSDE has also been devoting an increasing amount of time and attention to the subject of dyslexia and early reading difficulty. But we still see a lack of consistency across Maryland’s 24 public school systems, and we have a long way to go. So we need the establishment of the Stakeholder Advisory Group designated in this bill, and we need it to develop this Reading and Dyslexia Handbook. It will enable MSDE to substantially up its game, greatly improving its role in providing resources and guidance, and ensuring consistent implementation of effective practices in this vital area.

This Handbook will serve as an invaluable resource to local systems not just for the early identification of reading problems, but even more importantly as a source of effective and evidence-based interventions. And the Handbook will enable our schools to substantially improve the tiered systems of interventions and supports which they have been developing over the past years.

So – please pass this important bill. But as I believe the sponsors are aware, there is a need for a small amendment. The original language of this bill called for the workgroup to “develop” tools and materials for the identification of dyslexia and early reading difficulties – but in fact to do it right, the development of such tools requires years of costly research. Such an investment of time and effort would be both beyond the capacity of the Advisory Group, and in fact not necessary. Such instruments already exist; the task of the workgroup should be to review them and to “identify” the best ones available, to include in the Handbook. So we recommend that simple change of wording.

Thank you for your support of Senate Bill 126.