

Nicole Gable, MD, FAAP
Catonsville Primary Care Center
405 Frederick Road, Suite 210
Catonsville, Maryland 21228
Phone: 410-788-6565

House Bill 237: State Department of Education- Early Literacy and Dyslexia Practices- Guidelines and Assistance

January 15, 2021

Position: Support

Dear House Ways and Means Committee:

As a practicing pediatrician in the community for over 13 years, I have extensive experience caring for patients in times of academic struggle or failure. Parents feeling lost often turn to their pediatrician for help and hope. Many of these children have language disorders which are unidentified, misdiagnosed or misunderstood.

The Maryland General Assembly passed the Ready to Read bill in 2019, which initiated screening protocols for early literacy difficulties in young students. I support House Bill 237, a follow-up to the Ready to Read bill, requiring the Maryland State Department of Education to establish a stakeholder advisory group charged with developing a reading and dyslexia handbook. The reading and dyslexia handbook would provide consistent and current best practices on reading screening, instruction, and interventions. The reading and dyslexia handbook would be available to students, parents, teachers and the public.

I have the privilege of helping patients and parents untangle the web of their academic hardship. Some parents have been told their child struggles with reading or has a reading disorder, yet the word dyslexia has not been used. Others are certain their child is having difficulty learning but they do not know why. We spend significant amounts of time recalling important milestones in their educational and developmental history. An often-difficult conversation follows when we discuss how they have or have not been able to compensate for the skills they lack. We trudge forward, reaching out to educators, administrators, requesting testing through school. Families, those who can afford it, many times spend a considerable sum of money for private testing after being declined by their home school. With a diagnosis made, families again meet with teachers and administrators, hoping to have an IEP approved, yet still unsure which accommodations will be helpful. Without a definitive resource on reading and dyslexia practices, educators are often unsure as well.

Figuring out if children suffer from ADHD, anxiety or learning disabilities in the classroom through observation is a difficult task, particularly when teachers have not been trained to spot the signs of dyslexia. Even for teachers with many years' experience, the behavior resulting from these struggles is so similar they can overlap and be difficult to distinguish. There is a considerable number of children with ADHD who also suffer from dyslexia. In many of those children, their diagnosis of dyslexia has not been discovered, or they have been misdiagnosed as only having ADHD. You can see how this gets confusing.

Furthermore, we have been facing the COVID-19 pandemic for the past 10 months. As I write this testimony, most children in our state have not attended school in person for 308 days. I live in Howard County and have 3 children in elementary school, grades K, 3rd, and 5th. I can attest to the hardships associated with trying to conduct virtual school while working. We are fortunate to have the financial resources needed to supply added support for our children, even then, they are struggling. For families with a lack of resources, large sacrifices have been made at the workplace or in their child's education to be able to make it through each day. I am saddened by the loss families have had to endure because of school closures.

During this time of virtual learning, supplying IEP services to those students with an identified reading disability has been difficult and delayed. In addition, noticing students struggling with reading via a computer screen is a daunting task for teachers. When we emerge from this pandemic, there will invariably be learning loss throughout our school system. The reading and dyslexia handbook will support all struggling readers, whether they have fallen behind due to a learning disability or due to challenging learning circumstances during the pandemic.

Parents and teachers have not been given the resources to understand the signs of dyslexia, the impact dyslexia has on learning or how to implement changes at home and in the classroom. We are at a juncture where these resources and a new system of identifying struggling readers is crucial. Education is the most powerful force for change. The reading and dyslexia handbook supplies a low cost, universally available resource for the education that we desperately need at all levels of our school system. The reading and dyslexia handbook will move us toward success for all readers and specifically children with dyslexia, a highly intelligent group of learners.

Respectfully Submitted,

Nicole J. Gable, MD, FAAP
Pediatrician, Catonsville Primary Care Center