

**Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 1091
Education - Screening Requirements for Students With Reading Difficulties
- Alterations**

**House Ways and Means Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association offers this informational testimony regarding House Bill 1091, which would expand screening for reading difficulties from the existing requirement that all incoming elementary students are screened to all incoming students, regardless of grade level. It also adds an emphasis on screening for English Learners at risk of reading difficulties, though most English Learners would already be covered by the earlier screening requirement.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students for the careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

MSEA appreciates the intent of the sponsor. Identifying reading difficulties early is an important step in support students' literacy skills. At the elementary level, such screeners are most appropriately administered by reading specialists, who are certificated professionals highly specialized in literacy development. However, many secondary schools do not have reading specialists, and especially amid the statewide staffing shortage, schools may not have an employee with the availability and training to administer the screening that this legislation would require. This expanded requirement presents staffing and workload concerns.

Further, highlighting the requirement that English Learners should be screened for reading difficulties is redundant as incoming English Learners – or any student whose family reports that they speak a language other than English at home – are already required to take the WIDA Screener Assessment, which is typically



administered by an ESOL teacher. The WIDA Screener is a brief English proficiency assessment that evaluates a student’s reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency to determine whether they should be placed in the ESOL program and at what level.¹ The WIDA Screener and related intake questions can also indicate whether a student has had interrupted education prior to their enrollment.

English Learners (ELs) are already more likely than their non-EL peers to be classified as having a learning disability, but researchers urge the necessity of distinguishing between “language and literacy struggles that are due to learning English as a second language and those due to a language or reading disability.”² When screening assessments are not linguistically and culturally appropriate, we risk misidentifying English Learners as having learning or reading difficulties when they are actually in the early stages of acquiring English as an additional language.³

Despite its good intentions, this legislation poses workload concerns, creates a redundant screening requirement, and may lead to the inappropriate identification of reading difficulties among English Learners. To better support English Learners and screen all students for reading difficulties, we advise investing in research-supported screening tools, including those in students’ home languages, and prioritizing the recruitment, training, and retention of reading specialists and multilingual staff.^{4 5}

Due to these concerns, we respectfully urge the committee to issue an Unfavorable Report on House Bill 1091.

¹ WIDA Screener (Accessed March 2023). <https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/screener>.

² English Learners with or at Risk for Disabilities. Institute of Education Sciences (2021). <https://ies.ed.gov/blogs/research/post/english-learners-with-or-at-risk-for-disabilities>.

³ Growth in Literacy, Language, and Cognition in Children with Reading Disabilities who are English Language Learners. Institute of Education Sciences (2009). <https://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=775>.

⁴ UCSF Dyslexia Researchers Develop Tool to Flag Early Reading Challenges. University of California San Francisco (2022). <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2022/01/422216/ucsf-dyslexia-researchers-develop-tool-flag-early-reading-challenges>.

⁵ Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students. National Committee for Effective Literacy (2022). <https://secureservercdn.net/50.62.174.75/v5e.685.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/21018-NCEL-Effective-Literacy-White-Paper-FINAL.pdf>.