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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program Act (HB 475)

Testimony of Delegate Marc Korman-Favorable

Thank you Mr. Chair, Madam Vice Chair and members of the Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee. I come before you today to discuss the Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program Act (HB 475). The legislation would create a state matching grant program, administered by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to support organizations who provide free open-source phonics materials that adults can use to tutor children. We can use this as a tool to improve reading both in and out of the classroom. Support for phonics and providing supplemental instruction outside of the classroom is in line with MSDE's recently stated policy goals. At the January 11 State Board of Education meeting, the Board approved a resolution to implement "Science of Reading" programs, emphasizing the importance of phonological awareness and supplemental instruction.¹

The matching grant program would aid in the effort to improve Maryland's childhood literacy rates which have fallen over the last decade. In 2013, Maryland ranked 2nd nationally in fourth grade reading levels, but that ranking has fallen to 40th today.² Many students are not able to sound out and spell words in order to read fluently and write with ease.

Results from the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) reveal that in 2023 students in grades three through eighth have tested below 50% in English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency.³ A state investment in open-source phonics is one of several steps the state can take to boost childhood literacy rates.

The legislation will help address barriers to supplemental reading instruction that has been identified by MSDE as an area of need. In a 2021 report, MSDE addressed the problem of expensive copyrights for supplemental reading instruction outside the classroom. The report found that the prohibitive cost of supplemental literacy materials results in a lack of ELA proficiency within early childhood education.⁴ This not only impairs a student's ability to excel

¹ "Maryland State Board of Education Overview," Maryland State Department of Education, January 11, 2024, <https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/pages/default.aspx>.

² Kristen Griffith, "Maryland Doubles down on Science of Reading with New Literacy Plan," The Baltimore Banner, January 24, 2024, <https://thebaltimorebanner.com/education/k-12-schools/maryland-science-of-reading-plan-RUS7JQ3LPND65B7UQG22F7UZLU/>.

³ Lawson, Sylvia. "Maryland State Department of Education Provides 2023 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) Statewide Results." Maryland State Department of Education provides 2023 Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) statewide results, August 22, 2023. <https://news.maryland.gov/msde/msde-2023mcap-statewide-results/>.

⁴ "Aid to Education." Maryland State Department of Education, 2021. <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2023fy-budget-docs-operating-R00A02-MSDE-Aid-to-Education.pdf>.

within secondary education, but higher education as well. The MSDE report listed phonological awareness programs as part of a list of effective supplemental reading programs that are often inaccessible to Maryland families because their licensing is not openly accessible and expensive.

The Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Act aims to solve this problem by providing matching grants to organizations that provide open-source phonics materials. Open-source phonics refers to material with either freely obtainable source code, license for modification or permission for free distribution. You will read about some of the available materials in the other supporting testimony. MSDE will serve as the administering entity for the grants. Additionally, the legislation would include matching funds that MSDE would have discretion to allocate to eligible applicants. This legislation will not intrude on in-class teaching material, nor will it extract funding for classroom resources. Instead, open-source phonics serve to supplement classroom instruction by providing additional support for students who need it.

Various Maryland counties, such as Howard, have stated that due to additional phonics instruction, reading scores increased by 5.8 percentage points from 2019 to 2023.⁵ This upward trend illustrates that phonics programs are immensely helpful for students in primary education, and therefore worth the investment.

The Open-Source Phonics Matching Grant Program Act will encourage nonprofits to provide supplemental phonic materials for free, which will give our schools an alternative to expensive, commercial phonics programs. The legislation will aid in the effort to improve childhood literacy throughout the state of Maryland, cementing an equitable future in the process. I urge a favorable report.

⁵ Griffith, Kristen, and Liz Bowie. "Maryland Schools Taught Reading the Wrong Way for Decades. That's Changing." The Baltimore Banner, October 10, 2023. <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/education/k-12-schools/maryland-science-of-reading-AWTHRJGLYJCUTLFMMRBIPQVMOU/#:~:text=The%20system%20spent%20%E2%80%9Cquite%20a,points%20from%202019%20to%202023>.