

**Senate Bill 575 — State Department of Education - Early Literacy and Dyslexia
Practices - Guidance and Assistance**

Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs

March 3, 2020

Susan White, Special Educator

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Good Afternoon Chairman Pinsky and Committee Members:

My name is Susan White and I am a 22-year veteran special education teacher and mother of a child with dyslexia.

My story is not uncommon. It is similar to other Maryland families who endure an educational journey filled with heartache and frustration about reading. My story is different because, as a teacher, I see first hand that inconsistencies in how we teach reading, along with a lack of educator knowledge about reading and dyslexia impacts access to effective reading instruction and interventions as it did for my own son.

As an educator, I know the keys to recognizing effective reading instruction along with the early signs of reading difficulties and how to respond using knowledge and data. However, it has to be the correct data and the knowledge to know how to respond to it. I currently work in a school where the majority of teachers have been teaching for 10 or fewer years. They have all been trained to teach through a whole-language approach in which phonics is taught incidentally. As a result, our general educators have limited understanding of foundational literacy skills and how to build life-long literacy in students. Each layer is a stepping stone to the next level of development in learning to read proficiently. Our teachers recognize that something is wrong, but this lack of knowledge impacts their ability to respond appropriately and effectively. Our educators want and need access to information and training.

As I reflect on my reading journey with my son, I have contemplated how to improve the process and also support the Blueprint for Maryland. Catching struggling readers early is crucial because students who are not proficient readers in early elementary school rarely catch up to their peers. SB 575 is a cost effective way to develop an accessible resource that informs and supports effective PK-12 reading practices. A handbook can foster alignment across districts

and provide consistency within districts to help teachers address student needs as early as possible.

A Reading and Dyslexia handbook would also put schools and parents on the same page. The earlier we address reading struggles with solutions for parents and teachers, the less time students will spend in remediation and the less money we will spend. By documenting best practices in a handbook, we can ensure everyone has access to information that can help **prevent reading failure, close academic gaps and reduce student referrals to special education.**

Thank you for your time and I urge you to make a favorable report on this bill and the amendments.

Respectfully submitted,
Susan F. White

Continuation of Remarks, Written Submission for the Record:

My personal story is an example of how consistency across schools and across counties would be helpful in ensuring equity for all students regardless of where they live or what their early literacy experiences are.

My son first began to exhibit signs of difficulty with learning to read in kindergarten. When he was still struggling in the beginning of first grade I began to suspect dyslexia. Together with his classroom teacher, a veteran teacher of 20 years, we made a referral to the school-based problem-solving team to consider interventions. I was not invited to be a part of this discussion or the decision-making process.

This was unfortunate because what resulted was an instructional mismatch meaning that the intervention was not addressing the areas of weakness which were sound/symbol connections and phonemic awareness. Instead the school-based team chose to place him in Leveled Literacy Intervention or LLI, which is a whole-language approach to reading that uses MSV

cueing to teach reading. It is a discredited reading proactive that is not suitable for struggling students.

It took 2 years for my son's needs to be accurately identified and addressed. During that time he experienced emotional distress due to feeling like a failure at school. My son is in third grade and this is his first year with an Individualized Education Program in place and he is embracing the challenge of reading and writing knowing he has a support system of educators and family surrounding him.

We are a fortunate family. However, I will always wonder how our journey would have been different had my son received the correct intervention when I first recognized his needs in first grade. These early experiences will influence the rest of his life. I can only hope that he arrives at the other side a stronger person.