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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 575 (2020)

State Department of Education – Early Literacy and Dyslexia Practices – Guidance and Assistance

Before the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee: March 3, 2020

Senate Bill 575, cross-filed with House Bill 718, requires the Maryland Department of Education to establish a stakeholder advisory group to develop a reading and Dyslexia handbook to guide local school systems in implementing best practices for early literacy and Dyslexia. The bill outlines the stakeholders to make up the advisory group including various school educators and professionals, experts in neuroscience and reading curriculum and assessment, and representatives from the Dyslexia and special education community. The bill also requires the reading and Dyslexia handbook to include evidence-based best practices for comprehensive literacy instruction and intervention as well as procedures for identifying and evaluating students with reading difficulties. Finally, the bill requires the creation of recommended programs and materials that address the needs of at-risk and struggling readers and students with Dyslexia and the creation of a Dyslexia liaison to provide technical assistance to local school systems on implementing the bill's requirements.

This bill will amend the current requirements in section 4-136 of Maryland's Education Code¹ to provide consistency and efficiency for school systems conducting early literacy screenings. Additionally, the reading and Dyslexia handbook and the Dyslexia liaison will serve as a resource to assist teachers, parents, and administrators to provide students with Dyslexia or other reading difficulties with the best possible education. The resources outlined in this bill will help teachers to identify students who may be struggling earlier in their academic career. Currently, 23 other states have implemented handbooks or guidebooks to develop, sustain, and promote best practices for literacy development and dyslexia remediation and to improve student outcomes in reading and writing.² Additionally, the Texas State Education Agency has maintained and continuously updated their *Dyslexia Handbook* since 1992.³ Maryland should join these states in implementing a cohesive, consistent, and collaborative effort to assist students with Dyslexia and other reading difficulties in our public schools.

When most students are in the early years of elementary school the prospect of learning to read can be a challenging, yet exciting endeavor that exposes children to new worlds and

¹ MD Code Ann., Education, § 4-136 (2019).

² Decoding Dyslexia Maryland, Abbrev. State Dyslexia Handbooks & Guidance, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RKcJPt0KsrhZvqDNp-xOm3kGfiLSL40hb2O6AKL5dsk/edit> (last visited Feb. 17, 2020).

³ TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY, *The Dyslexia Handbook: Procedures Concerning Dyslexia and Related Disorders – 2018 Update*, November 2018, <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2018-Dyslexia-Handbook-Approved-Accommodated-12-11-2018.pdf>.

ideas. For most students this excitement outweighs the challenges and they work through the initial difficulties to embark on a new world of stories and tales. However, for some students, myself included, the challenges that come with learning to read are too great to overcome and that new world of adventure and excitement seems closed off and impossible to get to. Reading difficulties, such as Dyslexia and Dysgraphia, can make students feel that they are stupid and not cut out for school. These feelings are only heightened by school educators and administrators who are unfamiliar with ways to encourage and engage students with various reading difficulties. SB575 will provide educators and school communities with a toolkit for intervening early and educating students with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, and other literacy challenges, so that all students can embark on the journeys that come with learning to read. I am here today to encourage the favorable report of this bill, by speaking of my own experiences as a student with Dyslexia in the Frederick County Maryland public school system.

When I was in second grade, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire was released. My mother, my older sister, and I went to the bookstore at midnight for the release and bought three copies so we could all read it at once. I was so excited because this was the first time I would get my very own Harry Potter book to read and it was the longest one yet. My older sister spent the next two weeks doing nothing but reading; I on the other hand got frustrated with long sentences and confusing words and quit after the first few pages. My teacher told me not to be discouraged; it was a big book and a lot of the words weren't real anyway. Neither she nor I gave it a second thought. It wasn't until I was in middle school that I realized it wasn't just made up Harry Potter words that I struggled with. By eighth grade I had stopped reading almost altogether, opting to play outside or watch movies instead. My parents thought I was just a jock and my teachers thought I just didn't care about school. What none of them realized was that I actually hated sports and I cared a lot about school, I just didn't think I was good at it.

Nationwide, 6 to 7% of students who qualify for special education have a learning disability, and about 85% of those students have a primary learning disability in reading and language processing.⁴ Symptoms of Dyslexia include slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing, or mixing up similar words. Not all students with Dyslexia will qualify for special education, but they are likely to struggle with many aspects of academic learning and would benefit from systematic, explicit, instruction in reading, writing, and language processing.⁵ This bill will provide explicit guidance in address reading difficulties and Dyslexia with consistency across Maryland's 24 school districts, so that students' challenges and inefficiencies in reading and language processing are not overlooked.

It was in the eighth grade that I was finally diagnosed with Dyslexia. By that time, I truly hated any kind of reading. I had the option of obtaining an IEP, or an individualized education plan, however my teachers and parents were unfamiliar with the concept and feared I would be labeled a "special needs child" if I had one. They figured "hey she made it this far without one" and so it was never created. The truth was I had made it far without an IEP, but I should not have had to. I had developed the skills necessary to do well in school because that was important to

⁴ INTERNATIONAL DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION, DYSLEXIA BASICS <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-basics-2/> (last visited Feb. 17, 2020).

⁵ Moats, L. C., & Dakin, K. E. *Basic Facts About Dyslexia and Other Reading Problems*. BALTIMORE: THE INTERNATIONAL DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION (2008).

me and expected from my parents, but I hated every day I was in class and I avoided any subject with required readings. I learned that I could read small sections at a time and it was easier. I learned that if I followed the words with my finger they made more sense, even though my friends often teased me for reading like a little kid. I learned that if I stared down at the worksheet in front of me and just looked up when my classmates did, then my teachers would think I had completed the reading in the same time-span. I even became an expert at knowing which sections of a book would be tested and only read those fragments. This was mostly thanks to my older sister who took the same classes as me.

While I have had a successful academic career since those days, I still struggle with the amount of reading that is required in my chosen profession. Even today, as a third-year law student, I struggle through assigned readings using the tools and techniques I taught myself when I was a child. Break it up into chunks, read a paragraph and then look away, drag your finger across each line, highlight excessively, and lean close to the page. These tools have helped me achieve a high GPA, but have also given me poor eyesight, terrible posture, and several papercuts, plus added hours to my already extensive workload. My peers often think of me as an over-achiever spending 6 to 8 hours in the library any given day; what they don't realize is that I most likely spent those hours completing a 30-page reading they likely completed in 2 to 3 hours. I had learned all of the tricks to get myself through middle, high school, and even law school, but I never should have had to figure them out on my own. SB575 will help school systems intervene early in a child's academic career and empower students to succeed no matter what their challenges are. Students should never be held back from accessing their full potential just because they may need a few more tools in their toolkit than their peers. For these reasons, I strongly encourage the committee to provide a favorable report of SB575. Thank you.

This testimony is submitted on behalf Alison Venable, Student Attorney, of the Public Health Law Clinic at the University of Maryland Carey School of Law and not by the School of Law, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, or the University of Maryland System.