

Good morning distinguished members of the House Education Committee. I want to say thank you to Representative Gleim for the invitation to testify today and to represent the incredible faculty and staff of Carlisle Christian Academy at today's hearing.

I have worked in education for almost 20 years. Initially I taught in an alternative education classroom for students removed from the public schools and now currently I am in my ninth year as Head of School at Carlisle Christian Academy. I have also been an adjunct professor at Susquehanna University where I taught classes on Educational Psychology. The reason I mention this is because our focus at today's hearings on literacy and assessments was an important element of the Educational Psychology curriculum.

We all know the importance of literacy and the impact it has on our society. Research frequently connects literacy with successful life outcomes and conversely connects illiteracy with negative life outcomes. It is indeed a fundamental cornerstone for academic success which translates into positive life outcomes.

In our lower elementary program (grades K-2), our English Language Arts curriculum, which is based on textbook materials produced by educational publisher Bob Jones Press, has a targeted focus on the development of phonemic awareness and reading phonics skills. We have found our language arts curriculum approach to be very effective and we monitor both student achievement and the overall effectiveness of our curriculum by administering the MAPS Growth Assessment twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring. The MAPS Growth Assessment is taken online by students, takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes per subject to complete and results are typically available within 24 hours of completion. We prefer this type of assessment over the PSSA exam, which we discontinued use of in 2015 because it quickly gives us useful data and minimally disrupts classroom instructional time, which is a high priority for us.

Despite the strength of our Language Arts curriculum, we do find that there is a growing population of students who struggle with developing reading skills. To proactively meet the needs of these students, we piloted a reading skills enhancement program for struggling readers in 2017. Initially, we started with just a couple of students, one of which was a struggling second grader who was diagnosed with dyslexia by an educational psychologist.

Our pilot program was based on the Orton-Gillingham approach to reading instruction. The Orton-Gillingham approach is a well-respected methodology that has been used for many years for anyone who has a language-based learning disability. While it primarily targets individuals with dyslexia, it can be used effectively with many kinds of struggling readers. If we find that a student is struggling in the area of reading, as identified through the MAPS Growth testing and/or through identification by the teacher, and after initial remediation strategies in the classroom are found to not be effective, our reading specialist can administer the *"Good Sense Learning Reading Assessment"* developed by Dr. Erica Warren. This allows us to identify if our reading program will be a good fit for the student. We prefer that this identification happens prior to grade 3, however some students do not manifest their reading struggles until grades 4 or 5 when reading becomes more scaffolded and complex.

The curriculum of the Orton-Gillingham approach is a systematic and sequential progression through building skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, morphology, decoding, fluency and comprehension. But what we believe really sets this approach apart from other curriculum is the intentional use of multi-

modal and multi-sensory instructional approaches, including visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic techniques that will help the learner strengthen their reading skills through the development of stronger brain neurological pathways. To reiterate, it is both the strong phonics-based curriculum and the multi-sensory instructional methodology that when combined assists in helping the learner remediate their reading deficiencies.

We have found that our reading enhancement program has been incredibly successful, and we have been able to scale our program to serve more students and meet a larger variety of needs. In recent years we have had an increase in enrollment of students with significant learning gaps due to school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our reading specialist has successfully worked with students faced with this challenge and has helped them achieve success in the area of reading and quickly remediate these gaps. Additionally, in the past year, we piloted this program for use with two students who are English Language Learners. The program is proving to be highly effective for them as well in building a strong phonics base to support future literacy growth. And the second grader I mentioned who was part of our pilot program has matured into an excellent student, earning distinguished honor roll last year as a 7th grade student.

In conclusion, we have seen incredible success in helping struggling readers and we strongly believe that the Orton-Gillingham approach, which delivers excellent phonics instructions through a multi-sensory teaching methodology, is highly effective for working with a variety of struggling readers. As such, we are currently working to strategically plan how we may be able to expand this program and be able to offer reading tutoring services to the larger Carlisle area in order to assist students that may not attend our school so that they can develop strong literacy skills that will lay a foundation for future academic and life success.



**Written testimony of Laura Boyce before the House Education Committee
Monday, November 13, 2023
Harrisburg, PA**

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and Esteemed Education Committee Members:

My name is Laura Boyce, and I'm the Pennsylvania Executive Director of Teach Plus, a national education non-profit that empowers excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

Prior to joining Teach Plus to launch our Pennsylvania chapter in 2017, I was an elementary and middle school principal in Camden, New Jersey. And prior to that, I started my career as a high school social studies and English teacher in West and North Philadelphia.

I'm grateful the committee has dedicated a hearing to literacy and assessment today. The reasons for focusing on reading in particular seem self-evident, but I'd like to discuss them briefly. Research is clear that being able to read proficiently is strongly correlated with future success, not only in terms of future academic outcomes, but also in terms of a range of other quality-of-life indicators. For example, reading proficiently by the end of third grade is predictive of eighth grade reading success, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment outcomes,¹ while functional illiteracy is correlated with higher rates of unemployment, lower earnings, lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, and higher incarceration rates.²

The end of third grade or beginning of fourth grade is often identified as a key milestone for early readers, where students increasingly are expected to shift from learning to read to reading to learn, and literacy is a prerequisite skill to access content knowledge across all subject areas. Students who are not reading proficiently in third grade are four times more likely to fail to graduate from high school, and these odds are even worse for students who are Black, Hispanic, and/or low-income.³

Reading also has strong connections to ideas of liberation, self-determination, and self-actualization, particularly within the African American community. Historically, many American states made it illegal for enslaved people to learn how to read and write because reading was seen as connected to independence, critical thinking, and willingness to question injustice, and enslavers feared this would lead to rebellion.⁴ Frederick Douglass, who learned to read after hearing his enslaver say that learning to read would "forever unfit him to be a slave,"⁵ wrote, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."

A recent study of middle school students who were encouraged and supported to read more independently found many benefits beyond improvements in academic achievement: "Students reported becoming better people, a change also noticed by their parents and peers. Reading engaging narratives about characters with complicated lives, they reported,

¹ Lesnick, J., Goerge, R.M., & Smithgall, C. (2010). Reading on grade level in third grade: How is it related to high school performance and college enrollment?

² Mulcahy, E., & Bernardes, E. (2019). The relationship between reading age, education and life outcomes.

³ Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011). Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.

⁴ National Museum of African American History & Culture (2023). "Illegal to Read."

⁵ WBEZ Chicago (2022). Frederick Douglass taught himself to read.

helped them become more empathetic, less judgmental, more likely to seek multiple viewpoints, morally stronger, and happier...They reported improved self-control, and building more and stronger friendships and family relationships.”⁶

For me, personally, being a reader has been a huge part of my identity throughout my life. My mom taught me to read before I entered kindergarten, and I’ve been a bookworm ever since. I credit much of my K-12 and postsecondary academic success to my voracious reading and the vocabulary, curiosity, and perspective that reading brought me. Reading remains a great joy for me: something I look forward to on vacations, a social activity I enjoy with friends through book clubs, and one of my favorite ways to spend time.

But for all the joys reading has brought me, I’ve also seen how crippling illiteracy can be for students, both during and after their K-12 education. When I was preparing to be a secondary social studies teacher in New Jersey, I didn’t receive any training in how to teach students to read. During my first year as a teacher at West Philadelphia High School, I immediately realized that reading was a huge barrier to accessing the history and civics content I was attempting to teach to my 9th, 11th, and 12th grade students. Based on a reading test I administered at the beginning of the year, my students were, on average, four to six grade levels behind, reading at a 5th grade reading level on average. While the Common Core shifts that were beginning around the same time emphasized exposing students to more complex texts and a higher proportion of nonfiction texts, such as the history textbooks and primary source materials I used in my classes, many of my students struggled with basic decoding and comprehension. And I saw how these deficits were contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline; many of my students with the largest skill gaps would act out or skip class in order to avoid being put in situations where their inability to read was exposed. In fact, 85% of all juveniles who interact with the court system are functionally illiterate, along with 60% of all adults.⁷

Recognizing these literacy gaps, I got a second certification in English and got permission from my principal to teach an interdisciplinary humanities course. My thinking was that I could try to support my students’ reading growth in order to allow them to access both English and social studies content. However, I still didn’t have any training in how to actually teach students how to read. As a result, many of my efforts to help students access the content involved trying to work *around* their reading deficits by providing books on a lower reading level, providing audiobooks for students to listen along to, or reading texts aloud in class. Ultimately, as a high school teacher, I did not have the right training and skills to address my students’ literacy gaps, and I also recognized that they needed intervention much earlier to ensure they never got so far behind in the first place.

This realization was one reason I sought out an elementary principal role after earning my principal certification. Around this time, I did get some early literacy training that was based on the prevailing model at the time: balanced literacy. I learned, and encouraged my teachers to also use, tricks to help young students learn to “read,” such as memorizing a pattern and using the picture to figure out words. For example, an easy leveled book might follow an “I like ___” pattern: “I like apples. I like bananas. I like carrots.” I was trained to teach students to memorize the pattern “I like,” then to look at the picture and possibly the first letter of the word to guess the non-repeating word in the sentence. I found that these approaches worked for students up to a certain point, but that students would eventually reach a point where these tricks became unhelpful and counterproductive as they encountered more complex texts without pictures or predictable patterns and words. Students trained in these guessing techniques, often referred to as “three-cueing,” had no idea how to sound out multisyllabic words with different syllable types—and I *still* had no idea how to teach them.

A few years later, I became more familiar with the idea of the “science of reading,” primarily due to the investigative journalism of Emily Hanford and her reporting on the misalignment between how kids actually learn to read and how teachers are trained to teach reading. The science of reading movement is most strongly associated with structured literacy and an emphasis on systematic, explicit instruction in phonics (along with a focus on phonological and phonemic awareness), which are not as heavily emphasized in whole-language approaches championed by balanced literacy leaders

⁶ Ivey, G. & Johnston, P. (2023). *Teens Choosing to Read: Fostering Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Growth Through Books*

⁷ Begin to Read (2023). [Literacy Statistics](#).

such as Fountas & Pinnell and Lucy Calkins. Along with emphasizing systematic phonics instruction, many proponents of the science of reading strongly oppose the use of three-cueing systems and other teaching strategies that encourage students to use information other than graphophonic cues to guess words rather than decode them.

I went through a course myself, the AIM Pathways to Proficient Reading course, that taught me about the extremely well-established research base on how our brains learn to read. I learned that learning to read is not a natural process for humans; while our brains are hardwired for oral language so that we learn to speak naturally, written language was invented so relatively recently that our brains have to be rewired, and new neural pathways have to be created, in order for us to be able to translate visual letters into spoken words and back. Through recent advances in neuroscience and neuroimaging, scientists now have a very strong understanding of which parts of our brains are used for reading and which types of activities help us to “crack the code” and become readers.⁸ I also learned about research showing that 95% of elementary students, regardless of background, are cognitively capable of learning to read when they receive direct instruction in foundational skills; about 30% of students will learn to read with very little direct instruction, 50% will learn with high-quality Tier I instruction, and 15% will require additional time and support. Only about 5% of students with severe cognitive disabilities will continue to struggle even with high-quality Tier I instruction and additional support.⁹ But based on current proficiency rates, it’s clear that most students aren’t currently receiving the type of instruction needed to get us to anywhere near 95% proficiency in reading.

Reading Requires Building Neural Circuits Across Critical Brain Regions
Regions of the Brain Activated While Reading, as Viewed in fMRI Scans

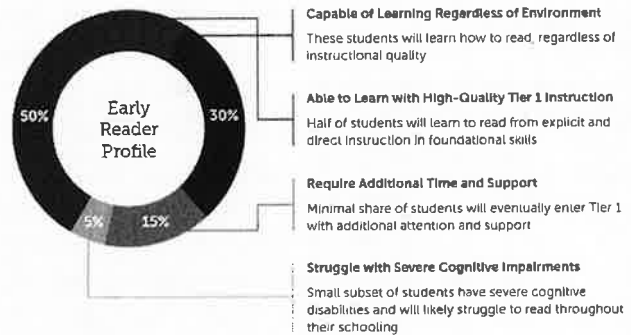
VISUAL CORTEX
Recognizes visual representations of written letters and words

AUDITORY CORTEX
Creates meaning out of speech sounds and builds comprehension



ANGULAR GYRUS
Connects discrete sounds to letters in order to form words and meaning

INFERIOR FRONTAL GYRUS
Aids in speech production, fluency, and comprehension



Images from EAB (2022). Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap: Embracing the Science of Reading. Pages 7 & 18.

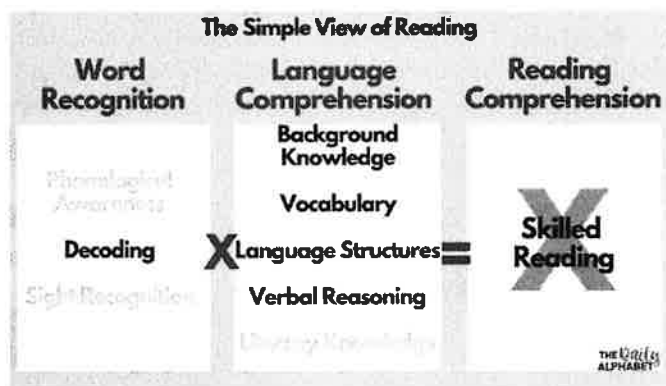


Image from What Is the Simple View of Reading?

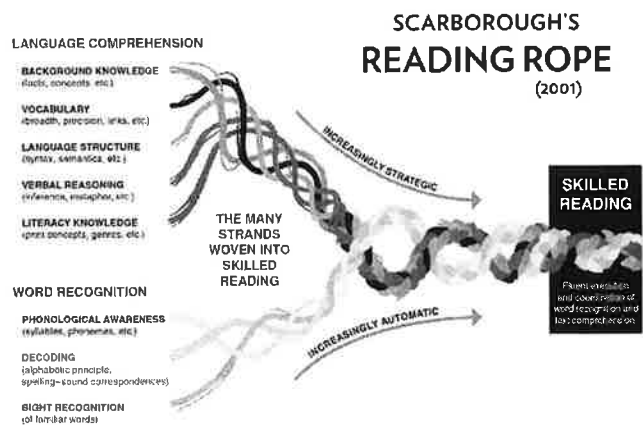


Image from What Is the Reading Rope?

⁸ Lexia (2023). What is the Science of Reading? How the Human Brain Learns to Read

⁹ EAB (2022). Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap: Embracing the Science of Reading. Pages 6-7.

In my studies, I learned what evidence-based, high-quality direct instruction in foundational reading skills looks like. I learned about phonology, orthography, phoneme-grapheme correspondences, morphology, and encoding. I learned that the science of reading isn't only about phonics, although that is an often-neglected component in teacher training, but also about many factors involved in comprehension, including oral language, vocabulary, and syntax. Importantly, I learned about the growing body of evidence on the importance of background knowledge for comprehension, and the need to develop students' background knowledge in just as explicit and systematic a way as we develop their phonetic knowledge.

I've used what I've learned to teach my son, who's not yet four years old and can easily read two and three-syllable words. One concern you often hear from whole-language advocates is that teaching kids phonics will kill their joy of reading. But my son loves to read. Everything he's learned, he's learned in engaging, age-appropriate ways: he's developed phonological awareness through rhyming and substitution games and songs. He learned his letter names and sounds through puzzles, books, and music. He's developed his vocabulary through rich oral conversations and hours spent reading books together. He loves reading chapter books with Mom and Dad for bedtime and reading himself and his baby brother picture books for hours every day. Unlocking the code of reading hasn't killed his love of reading; it's sparked it.

But for too many of Pennsylvania's students, the life-changing right to read is still out of reach. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, only 34% of Pennsylvania 4th graders read proficiently. While Pennsylvania students scored just above the national average in 4th grade reading with a scale score of 219, this is lower than a high-point of 227 in 2015, and overall represents a regression over the past 20 years, with an average score of 221 in 2002.¹⁰ Additionally, Dr. Ed Fuller from Penn State has calculated that Pennsylvania has the largest racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps of any state in the country on the NAEP, due in part to inequities in educational funding and opportunities.¹¹

During this same time period, one state stands out for its rapid gains in early reading. Between 2013 and 2019, Mississippi's 4th grade reading NAEP scores increased faster than any other state in the nation, moving from one of the lowest-performing states to in line with the national average. After adjusting states' scores to control for age, race/ethnicity, special education status, income, and English language learner status, the Urban Institute found that Mississippi was the second-highest-performing state in the country for 4th grade reading in 2019.¹² Mississippi's success has gained national attention and even generated references to a "Mississippi miracle."

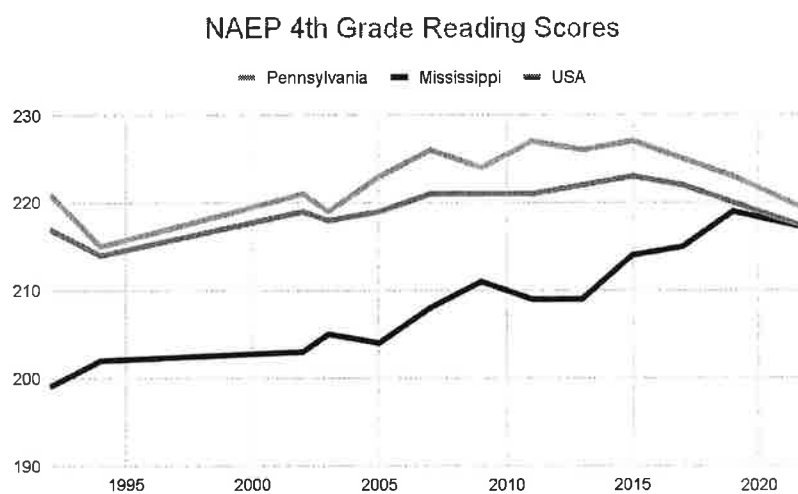


Image Source: Created by Laura Boyce based on NAEP data

¹⁰ The Nation's Report Card (2022). [2022 Reading State Snapshot Report: Pennsylvania Grade 4 Public Schools](#).

¹¹ Fuller, E.J. (2020). [Fourth Grade Achievement Gaps on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Pennsylvania in 2019](#).

¹² Urban Institute (2020). [America's Gradebook: How Does Your State Stack Up?](#)

Unadjusted versus adjusted scores

⊗ Unadjusted ● Adjusted

2019 4th-grade reading with controls for age, race or ethnicity, special education status, free and reduced-price lunch eligibility (imputed), and English language learner status

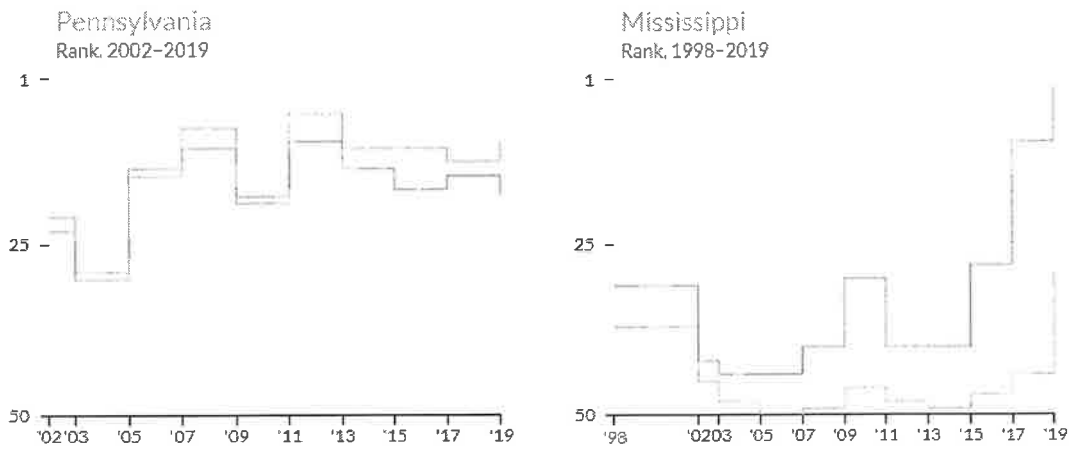


Image Source: [America's Gradebook: How Does Your State Stack Up?](#)

What policies contributed to these rapid student outcome gains in Mississippi? Experts points to a series of policy changes that, in concert, led to a transformation in teaching and learning in the Magnolia state:

- **Teacher preparation** - requiring teacher preparation programs to adjust their curricular offerings, instructional approaches, and/or content provided to pre-service teachers to better align with the science of reading;
- **Teacher licensure** - requiring pre-service and/or in-service teachers to pass a licensure test demonstrating knowledge of the science of reading to earn or renew certification;
- **Professional development/ coaching** - requiring teachers to participate in professional development in the science of reading and/or instituting a program of instructional coaching;
- **Assessment** - requiring schools to use approved science-of-reading-aligned assessment materials for identifying struggling readers and/or measuring reading progress;
- **Curriculum** - requiring schools to use approved science-of-reading-aligned curricular and instructional materials to teach reading;
- **Instruction/Intervention** - requiring schools to use specific science-of-reading-aligned instructional methods and/or a specific type/frequency of intervention for struggling readers.¹³

Historically, Pennsylvania has not prescribed any specific approaches to teaching reading at the state level or required pre-service or in-service teachers to receive specific training or content related to the science of reading. However, as the science of reading has gained attention over the past several years and as states such as Mississippi have made rapid gains in reading through a structured literacy approach, Pennsylvania policymakers have begun to explore policies to advance the science of reading.

	Teacher Preparation	Teacher Licensure	PD/ Coaching	Assessment	Curriculum	Instruction/ Intervention
Mississippi	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
Pennsylvania	☑	✗	☑	?	?	?
☑ = Passed ? = Proposed ✗ = Not Proposed						

¹³ Schwartz, S. (2023). [Which States Have Passed ‘Science of Reading’ Laws? What’s in Them?](#)

In spring 2022, the State Board of Education included requirements that teacher preparation programs and school districts in Pennsylvania begin to train teachers in structured literacy in updates to Chapter 49, the state’s teacher certification regulations.¹⁴ Later that year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education finalized structured literacy competencies based on the International Dyslexia Association’s Knowledge & Practice Standards.¹⁵ In summer 2022, the General Assembly included a new optional pilot program to train teachers and instructional coaches in structured literacy as part of Act 55, the 2022-23 school code.¹⁶ Together, these policy changes fully address the Teacher Preparation element of science of reading policy changes, and they partially address the Professional Development and Coaching element, although the coaching program is not universal or mandatory.

House Bill 998, proposed by Representatives Justin Fleming and Jason Ortity, and its companion bill in the Senate, SB 801, are the next logical steps toward a comprehensive approach to enacting the science of reading into policy in Pennsylvania. This legislation would require districts to adopt instructional materials aligned with the science of reading, adopt universal screeners to identify struggling readers, and design and implement literacy plans for struggling readers.

I understand that some may have concerns about the development of approved-material lists at the state level, considering Pennsylvania’s tradition of local control. However, as an educational leader, I’ve seen repeatedly that alignment of content across not only professional development but also curriculum and assessments is critical if efforts to change instructional practice are to succeed.

One experience as a rookie principal clarified this concept for me. Recognizing that much of the instruction in my building did not meet grade-level standards for rigor, I had devoted countless hours of professional development, observation, feedback, and coaching to trying to ensure my teachers understood the state academic standards and were developing sufficiently detailed and rigorous lesson plans. Unfortunately, I still wasn’t seeing the quality I was looking for in either the plans or the actual instruction. I shared this challenge with the principal of one of the highest-performing schools in Newark. His first question to me was, “What curriculum are your teachers using?” I replied that most weren’t using any curriculum and were writing their own lesson plans from scratch or cobbling together resources from many different places. His advice to me was simple: adopting high-quality instructional materials is the highest-leverage action you can take to ensure high-quality instruction in your building. No matter how much professional development you provide, if your teachers don’t have strong materials, the impact of your training will be limited and the variation in instructional quality will be high. And while I was viewing professional development as the only way to build my teachers’ content knowledge, he told me that strong curricular materials and assessments are actually some of the *best* tools for building teacher knowledge and practice, because they help teachers see what it looks like to teach and assess the standards with rigor.

Years later, Teach Plus was supporting five schools in the School District of Philadelphia by coaching grade-level teacher leaders to support their grade teams in improving literacy practices. This was before the district had made the shift to embracing the science of reading; the district’s literacy framework was still built around balanced literacy and guided reading. We began to train our teacher leaders in the science of reading, and they had many realizations about how much they’d never been taught about teaching kids to read; how they’d been “sold a story,” in the words of Emily Hanford, that turned out to not be true; and how this misinformation had impacted their students, who had been taught by well-intentioned teachers in ways not aligned with evidence. However, even with this newfound knowledge, the teachers and teams were frustrated: although they now knew better, they were still being asked to use materials (specifically, leveled readers and Lucy Calkins’ Units of Study), assessments (specifically, the DRA and F&P), and practices (specifically, three-cueing, guided reading, and other balanced-literacy techniques) that were not evidence-based.

¹⁴ Pennsylvania Bulletin (2022). [22 Pa. Code Ch. 49: Certification of Professional Personnel](#). Search text for “structured literacy” to find the relevant language.

¹⁵ Pennsylvania Department of Education (2022). [Structured Literacy \(SL\) Program Framework Guidelines](#).

¹⁶ Pennsylvania General Assembly (2022). [Public School Code of 1949 - Omnibus Amendments, Act of Jul. 8, 2022, P.L. 620, No. 55](#). Section 9 is the relevant section.

It's these experiences, along with the example of states like Mississippi, that lead me to conclude that taking a more proactive approach to curriculum and assessment is necessary if Pennsylvania's schools are to truly transform their instructional practices to align with the science of reading. Experts tell us, and my experience has confirmed for me, that there must be tight alignment between teacher training and methods, instructional materials, and assessment if we want to see true teacher practice change.

While this may feel new and uncomfortable for some, it's a small price to pay to ensure all of our students have access to the life-changing skill of reading. I know the bills' authors have been thoughtful in collecting and incorporating stakeholder feedback, and I believe the bills' inclusion of a Reading Leadership Council made up of educators with expertise in structured literacy, which would be responsible for developing lists of approved materials and screeners aligned with the science of reading, should alleviate the concerns of those worried about investing too much power with the state department of education.

Others may express concern that requiring districts to purchase new instructional materials or assessments will mean one more unfunded mandate for schools, or that this is just a ploy to make money for vendors. In response to the first concern, the bill's sponsors have included a grant program in the bill to defray the costs of purchasing new materials. As for the second concern, vendors competing for the business of school districts is not a new phenomenon. What's different is that this bill introduces a level of quality control that was not present before, so that vendors' products must be vetted by experts to ensure their materials actually meet the standard of being evidence-based. I remember when, after the adoption of the Common Core, every vendor put a "Common Core-aligned" sticker on their old textbooks and marketed them as meeting the new standards, whether or not this was actually the case. Without a mechanism such as the Reading Leadership Council to ensure quality, the same race to put "Science of Reading-aligned" stickers on materials of varying quality will be repeated, with each district in Pennsylvania struggling to determine which programs are actually evidence-based and which are just nicely packaged. While some vendors may benefit from being highly rated by an objective body, as has been the case with the national EdReports rating system, they will only benefit on the basis of merit, as opposed to the status quo, where some vendors have profited through effective marketing of shoddy products. And the bill still allows districts to identify other vendors and materials not currently on the Council's list if they can demonstrate that they are evidence-based.

As I reflect on the necessity of making early literacy a top priority among lawmakers of both parties in Pennsylvania, I think about one particular student, Jamica. Jamica was infamous at our school for her frequent disciplinary infractions; she was constantly getting kicked out of class, arguing with classmates and teachers alike, and getting in fights. As I got to know her—she was sent to my office almost daily—I got to see another side of her as well; she had a great sense of humor, was curious and witty, and was fiercely devoted to her family. I also realized one day that she could not read. It became clear that her behaviors in school came from a place of shame and hopelessness: she had given up on anyone ever being able to help her crack the code that would allow her to access the content being taught in her 8th grade classes. When she was exposed to explicit, systematic phonics instruction, she progressed rapidly—and her disruptive behavior disappeared as those defense and avoidance mechanisms were no longer necessary.

We have far too many Jamicas across Pennsylvania—students who have never really gotten a chance to learn to read in the way science tells us is best. And we have too many teachers, like me, who never really got the chance to learn to teach reading the correct way. Chapter 49 and Act 55 of 2022 were first steps in the right direction. HB 998 is the logical next step to ensure that our teachers, who are just beginning to be trained in the science of reading, will have access to aligned curricular and assessment materials to complement and reinforce their training. Mississippi's story is impressive, but let's make Pennsylvania the next national leader in early literacy. Our students deserve it.

House Education Committee Written Testimony
Maria Toglia, EdD, Certified School Psychologist & PBIDA Director of Capacity Building
November 13, 2023

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and Esteemed Education Committee Members:

My name is Dr. Maria Toglia. I am a certified school psychologist, and the Director of Capacity Building at the Pennsylvania Branch of the International Dyslexia Association. As a school psychologist, I have worked with hundreds of students in Pennsylvania public schools over the past 20 years. I have evaluated students for special education, made instructional recommendations, worked on Child Study Teams, and supported students with a broad range of learning needs, the most common being problems with reading. The most frequent disability category in special education is Specific Learning Disability, and the majority of those students struggle with reading.¹

The degree to which my recommendations actually help a struggling reader become proficient is dependent upon the capacity of that child's school and teachers to deliver high quality, evidence-based reading instruction. The discrepancies in reading outcomes² among schools in Pennsylvania suggest a great deal of variability across the Commonwealth in the capacity for high quality reading instruction. As a practitioner, I have even observed within district variability.

I've worked with students who were able to receive the evidence based, explicit and systematic reading instruction they needed, who are now on a trajectory toward college. I have also worked with students who were not able to get the high-quality instruction they needed, have developed severe behavioral and social emotional difficulties, and are on a trajectory toward the criminal justice system. I believe some of this variability in capacity is related to funding disparities and a lack of resources, but we also know from the National Council on Teacher Quality, that much of the variability in the quality of reading instruction is the result of many teachers not being adequately trained in the science of reading in college.³

Importantly, this was addressed by the PA legislature when the most recently revised Chapter 49 requirements for structured literacy teacher preparation were codified into state law in 2022. Training new teacher candidates in structured literacy, a proven⁴ method for teaching children to read, is an important step in addressing the reading crisis in Pennsylvania. However, we still have a large pool of in-service teachers who are not trained in the science of reading. This is a significant challenge since **teachers are the single best weapon against reading failure.**⁵ **The converse is also true; poor instruction can cause reading problems for children.**⁶

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, 2023. Students With Disabilities. Condition of Education.

² Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023. PSSA English Language Results.

³ National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020. Teacher Prep Review.

⁴ International Dyslexia Association, 2018. Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

⁵ Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998. Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington DC: National Academy Press.

⁶ Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012. Teacher's knowledge base for implementing response to intervention models in reading. Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 25, 1691-1723.

Instructional methods that encourage guessing based on context or picture cues do not support the neurological connections that must be built in the brain to become a proficient reader.⁷

The Need for Evidence Based Reading Instruction

We have a reading crisis here in Pennsylvania. As it stands now, results from the NAEP indicate that only 34% of students in PA are able read on grade level in 4th grade.⁸ This is untenable since we know from the research that children who are not on grade level by the time they enter 4th grade are at greater risk for a number of negative outcomes:⁹

- Four times more likely to drop out of school
- Increased risk for criminal justice involvement
- Increased risk for substance abuse and mental health problems
- The majority, 75%, will never catch up

Adults with Low literacy are more likely to:^{10 11}

- Require public assistance
- Be relegated to the lowest wage jobs making less than \$300 per week, perpetuating generational poverty and inequality
- Become incarcerated
- Experience poor health outcomes- low educational attainment is associated with a shorter life span, by 10-12 years, compared to adults with advanced degrees

Consequently, solving the reading crisis in Pennsylvania represents a significant social justice challenge. We know that more than 50% of black students compared to less than 25% of white students nationwide fall in the Below Basic range, a disparity that persists in our Commonwealth.¹² Economically, a Forbs Foundation study estimates the United States is likely losing up to \$2.2 trillion annually because of adult low literacy.¹³ This is simply not sustainable. In order for Pennsylvania to thrive socially and economically, we must develop a literate citizenry that is able to participate productively in our society and in our democracy.

⁷ Seidenberg, 2017. *Language at the speed of sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It* New York, NY: Basic Books.

⁸ National Center for Reading Statistics, 2022. *State snapshot: Pennsylvania, grade 4, public schools.*

⁹ Schneider, Chambers, Mather, Bauschatz & Bauer, 2016. *The effects of an ict-based reading intervention on students' achievement in grade two.* *Reading Psychology*, 37, 798-831. doi:10.1080/02702711.2015.1111936

¹⁰ Kaplan, 2019. *More than medicine: The broken promise of American health.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹¹ Wood, 2010. *The role of literacy in policy in labor market success.*

¹² National Center for Education Statistics, 2022. *National Student Group Scores and Score Gaps.*

¹³ Nietzal, 2020. *Low literacy levels among U.S. adults could be costing the economy \$2.2 trillion a year.*

It doesn't have to be this way. We know from 50 years of multi-disciplinary research how to teach children to read. The science of reading has taught us how the human brain learns to read, and it has taught us what instructional methods have been proven to work with children.¹⁴

House Bill 998 draws on what we know from the science of reading and proposes measures that will help address the research to practice gap- the gap between what the science tells us works and what's actually being done in the classroom to teach young children to read.

Early literacy development

Some of the most important research that has come out of cognitive psychology in the last few decades has been findings demonstrating just how plastic and malleable the human brain is, especially in the early years of child development. **This neuroplasticity means that the brain is able to change. It is able to build new neural connections in response to experiences in the environment, including in response to reading instruction.**¹⁵

This is important since we know the human brain is not wired for reading the way it is wired to learn how to speak. We are not born with dedicated areas in the brain for reading. Rather, **the brain must convert areas devoted to oral language and other cognitive process to build a new reading circuit.**¹⁶ It is the neuroplasticity, the malleability of the brain that allows this to happen. Much of the reading circuit is built even before a student steps foot into school as a result of their experiences at home. There is a great deal of variability in the degree to which children are exposed to the types of literacy rich experiences that promote growth of the reading circuit, such as being read to, hearing and using many vocabulary words, and having experiences that build background knowledge about the world. Consequently, children come to school with varying levels of readiness to learn how to read.¹⁷

Despite this variability in reading readiness, the plasticity of the brain in early childhood allows students to benefit from instructional practices that support the new neural connections that must be built for reading. **Teachers are actually brain builders!**¹⁸ This is particularly important for children who come to school with fewer literacy related experiences. **The instruction students receive changes the structure of the brain and causes the brain to build new neuronal connections.** This has vast implications for human learning, how students are taught to read, and when students at risk for reading failure receive intervention.

Given the high degree of brain plasticity in early childhood, it is not surprising that research shows the earlier a child is identified as being at risk for reading failure and the earlier he or she receives the instruction and intervention they need, the faster they will build their skills.¹⁹

¹⁴ The Reading League, 2022. [The Science of Reading Defining Guide.](#)

¹⁵ Wolf, Ullman-Shade & Gottwald, S. (2016). [Lessons from the reading brain for reading development and dyslexia. Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, 21\(2\), 143-156. doi:10.1080/19404158.2016.1337364](#)

¹⁶ Wolf, M. 2007. [Proust and the squid: The story of the reading brain.](#) New York: Harper Collins

¹⁷ Ne'enan & Shaul, 2020. [Reading Readiness or Impairment. Educational Psychology Volume 12.](#)

¹⁸ Whitman & Kelleher, 2016. [Neuro Teach: Brain Science and the Future of Education.](#) NY: Harper Collins.

¹⁹ Scanlon, Anderson & Sweeny, 2016. [Early Intervention for Struggling Readers.](#) NY: Guilford Press.

We can still teach older students and even adults to read, but it is much easier to help a struggling reader when they are young. **Being able to identify children who are at risk for reading failure early is crucial. Universal screening, a critical component of HB998, can be performed quickly and efficiently by teachers who have been trained to use these instruments.**²⁰ It takes minutes. And the data these screeners produce allows teachers to identify who is on track, who is advanced and needs enrichment, and who is at risk and requires intervention.

For the students identified at risk, being able to receive evidence-based interventions to build the neural connections and the skills they need to become proficient readers is the difference between continuing to struggle, likely into adulthood, or being able to thrive in school and in life. Currently,²¹ 39% of PA students fall in the Below Basic range in reading in 4th grade. These children cannot profit from school without significant supports. They simply do not have the skills to access the curriculum. Further, 29% of students are in the Basic range. They too need support since the general education curriculum is geared toward students with grade level reading skills. **The right, evidence-based supports can make all the difference for these students.**

The Importance of Evidence Based, High Quality Instruction

We cannot solve the reading crisis in Pennsylvania unless all schools have the capacity to deliver evidence based, high quality instruction to their students, a critical component of HB998. We know from the research that the majority of children learning to read require structured literacy in order to become proficient readers.²² And for the children with dyslexia, they not only require structured literacy, they need intensive interventions, with many repetitions and opportunities to practice to become proficient.

Structured literacy is explicit, systematic, cumulative and addresses the structure of the English language, including phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principal, phonics, spelling, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.²³ High quality reading instruction also builds students' background knowledge in content areas and is culturally relevant. Teaching reading is complicated and requires expert knowledge. As Dr. Louisa Moats famously proclaimed, "Teaching reading is rocket science."²⁴

Building this type of specialized knowledge requires ongoing teacher training and support. **HB998 calls for a program of professional development for teachers of reading, along with**

²⁰ What Works Clearing house. Best Practice for RTI: Universal Screening.

²¹ National Center on Education Statistics, 2022. Reading State Snapshot Report: Pennsylvania, Grade 4, Public Schools

²² Young, 2020. The ladder of reading and writing.

²³ International Dyslexia Association, 2018. Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

²⁴ Moats, 2020. Teaching reading is rocket science. What teachers should know and be able to do.

coaching support, which we know from the research is important not only for building teacher knowledge, but for changing and mastering instructional practices.²⁵

One of these instructional practices involves using the data from universal screening measures to develop intervention plans for students at risk, another important component of HB 998. Structured literacy is intended to be delivered in the context of multi-tiered systems of support where all children receive a strong core, Tier 1 evidence-based reading curriculum. Children at risk receive more intensive Tier 2 instruction, and the children with most need receive the most intensive Tier 3 services.²⁶

Children at risk for reading failure need carefully planned, data driven intervention plans, that are delivered with sufficient intensity and are targeted to individual needs. Progress monitoring, which can be accomplished using features available in many universal screening tools, allows teachers to monitor whether tailored interventions are having the desired effect so that adjustments can be made, and these data allow everyone, including parents, to know when goals have been met.

The Importance of Teacher Training

Effective evidence-based reading instruction is complex and requires specialized knowledge. Teachers must develop expertise about basic language constructs, including phonological and phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics instruction, and morphology in order to successfully teach all students to read. Further, teachers need specialized knowledge about reading development, classroom implementation strategies and assessment methods in order to meet the needs of developing readers using structured literacy practices.²⁷

A body of research has developed that describes how professional development programs can be designed to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully teach students to read. The principles of effective adult learning indicate teachers benefit from active learning experiences that are directly relevant to classroom teaching and supported by communities of practice that allow for reflection and discussion with peers.²⁸ Ongoing expert coaching and mentoring are important for facilitating teachers' acquisition of reading content knowledge and mastering new instructional practices.²⁹ **Importantly, long term intensive professional development programs tend to produce the best results in improving both teacher knowledge and student outcomes.**³⁰

²⁵ Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011. Literacy coaching as a component of professional development. *Reading and Writing*, 24(7), 773-800.

²⁶ Stollar & Dunn, 2023. Bringing the science of reading to light using MTSS: One school's story.

²⁷ International Dyslexia Association, 2018. Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading.

²⁸ Stewart, 2014. Transforming professional development to professional learning. *Journal of Adult Education*, 43(1), 28-33.

²⁹ Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011. Literacy coaching as a component of professional development. *Reading and Writing*, 24(7), 773-800.

³⁰ Darling-Hammond, Hylar & Gardner 2017. Effective Teacher Professional Development. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Consequently, it will take long term investments in professional development by the Pennsylvania State Legislature and PDE to develop a well-trained and effective corps of in-service reading teachers.

Finally, the implementation of sustainable and effective evidence-based reading instruction in schools requires effective leadership. Principals in particular should be knowledgeable about the science of reading and have the capacity to build supports into the system that will promote teacher efficacy. Implementation science highlights the importance of enabling contexts such as school policies, and leadership roles that contribute to building teacher capacity. The Dynamic Early Literacy Framework,³¹ developed by two Pennsylvania literacy experts, and the National Implementation Resource Network³² are excellent resources that can help support large scale implementation success.

In closing, the essential components of HB998 addressed in this testimony are aligned with what we know from the research about how children learn to read. This bill is an essential step in the effort to address the reading crisis in Pennsylvania and is a logical next step following the recent statutory requirements in structured literacy teacher preparation. In order for reading outcomes in Pennsylvania to change significantly, all aspects of the education system must also change in alignment with one another. This should include future legislation calling for the revision of the licensing exam for teachers of reading so we can be assured that new teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to be effective.

As the Director of Capacity Building at the Pennsylvania Branch of the International Dyslexia Association, I am committed to continuing our efforts to build and support the capacity of our educators to deliver high quality, evidence-based reading instruction to their students. I believe it is our ethical obligation to apply what we know from the science of reading to successfully teach all children learning to read in our Commonwealth.

Respectfully,

Maria Togli, Ed.D.

³¹ Galbally & Scharff, 2022. Pilot study of the Dynamic Early Literacy Framework for implementation of science of reading aligned instruction.

³² Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. National Implementation Research Network.

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State of Connecticut

SENATE

Twenty-seventh District

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Finance, Revenue & Bonding Committee

Member
Commerce Committee
Education Committee
Judiciary Committee

Testimony on House Bill No. 998

**AN ACT AMENDING THE ACT OF MARCH 10, 1949 (P.L.30, NO.14),
KNOWN AS THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CODE OF 1949, PROVIDING FOR
EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION**

Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee

November 13, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Schwyer, Chairman Topper, and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

It is such a pleasure to be with you today, speaking in support of House Bill 998, *An Act amending the act of March 10, 1949 (P.L.30, No.14), known as the Public School Code of 1949, providing for evidence-based reading instruction*, a bill that would provide for evidence-based reading instruction in Pennsylvania. My name is Pat Billie Miller, and I am the Connecticut State Senator representing the 27th district. I am also the Chair of the Connecticut Legislative Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, and the lead sponsor of Connecticut's 2021 "Right to Read" legislation.

As a child growing up in the segregated South and Connecticut, I knew that education was my best chance to escape poverty. Literacy was the foundational skill that opened the doors of opportunity for me—because once I learned to read, I could read to learn independently about anything that interested me. For me, any conversation about education equity begins with the cornerstone of evidence-based early literacy practices.

Beyond my personal connection to literacy, I became involved with the science of reading more than a decade ago—when the Connecticut

Legislative Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, the UConn Neag School of Education, and the Connecticut State Department of Education gathered a team of literacy experts to work directly with school districts to address reading gaps with the Connecticut K-3 Literacy Initiative (CK3LI). Together, we developed a framework anchored in evidence-based literacy practices that has since become known as the Connecticut Literacy Model (CTLM). Originally piloted in select high-need school districts, this model builds tiered systems of support in schools and provides them with ongoing professional development in early literacy pedagogy. CTLM has been rigorously researched and shown to produce a statistically significant impact on measures of phonemic awareness, word reading, and reading fluency with increasing effects across years of implementation (See Appendix I).

This group of strong believers in the science of reading has been working to expand CTLM for years, steadily building its case, one child at a time, for more robust early literacy policy and investment in Connecticut, until the eventual passage of Connecticut's 2021 Right to Read bill.

Under Right to Read, all state and local efforts related to literacy are now overseen by a new Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success ("Center") within the State Department of Education. The law tasks the Center with implementing a coordinated state-wide reading plan, including setting evidence-based curricular and implementation requirements for districts; supporting teachers, schools, and districts through coaching and professional development; establishing tiered supports in our highest-need districts; and coordinating with teacher preparation programs. In short, it uses a top-down leadership model to chart a new era for literacy in our state.

Almost two years since the passage of Right to Read, we are deep into our implementation effort, and I am excited about the shape it is taking. We have built a robust Center, which has developed its own rubric and team to evaluate early literacy curricula, and produced an approved list of seven K-3 reading curricula. All of Connecticut's public school districts must implement a curriculum from among this list by July 1, 2025. A waiver provision is included in the law that allows for innovation, but not deviation from the science of reading (See Appendix II).

In the meantime, the State Department of Education and the Center are already coordinating to provide districts with professional development. In 2022, they worked with the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents to launch a Science of Reading Masterclass that provides professional learning and coaching to cohorts of district literacy teams. In

addition, using ARPA funding as a carrot for districts, the state has recently begun an aligned “Right to Read Statewide Professional Learning Series” focused on the Connecticut Literacy Model and the science of reading.

Although we’re incredibly proud of our progress, this process has not been without challenges. One of the significant roadblocks we have faced is contending with a long tradition in our state of local autonomy for school districts. Beliefs about literacy pedagogy are deeply held—often based upon years of professional development within cohorts of peers in teaching methods not supported by research and science. Whether or not their training has reflected evidence-based practices, teachers care deeply about their students, and some have therefore had difficulty coming to terms with the idea that their training has not been up-to-date. Consequently, many struggle with the demand for change, and some of our public school districts have expected to be treated as exceptions when it comes to our new curricular requirements. This is compounded by the fact that in our well-resourced districts parents and caregivers have quietly and literally paid the price to access reading interventions for their children when schools fail them.

In Connecticut, I believe that this challenge has only been surmountable due to tremendous, centralized leadership within the State Department of Education. We have a Commissioner, Charlene Russell-Tucker, who is dedicated to pursuing student equity. Commissioner Russell-Tucker has empowered our Center by hiring a Director, Dr. Melissa Hickey, who truly understands evidence-based literacy pedagogy, and who is deeply committed to implementing the legislative intent of our Right to Read law. Without this strong leadership in place, I believe it would have been easy for the state to cave to local pressures or to implement the law only nominally. I am attaching “Reading at All Costs: All Children Can Read by Fourth Grade,” CT Building on Reading Reform which describes Connecticut’s journey to implement the science of reading for all school districts (see Appendix III).

We are so pleased to see many aspects of our bill represented in the legislation before you today. House Bill 998 uses a three-pronged approach to systematizing early literacy in Pennsylvania by establishing a state-approved list of evidence-based reading curricula; using aligned screeners to identify struggling readers; and establishing intervention protocols based upon that screening data.

From an outsider's perspective, but one who is on this journey with you, you are on the right path. I know firsthand the difference that a high-quality education can make in someone's life.

In quoting Representatives Justin Fleming and Jason Ortity in their co-sponsorship memoranda, "This work takes courage, heart and will require leadership." I applaud you for having the political will to do what's necessary to open doors of opportunities for all students in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to testify today.

Connecticut Literacy Model

The Connecticut Literacy Model (CTLM) includes the essential components of a comprehensive multi-tiered framework for supporting reading success for all students in grades K-3 aligned with the Science of Reading. It includes the following critical features:

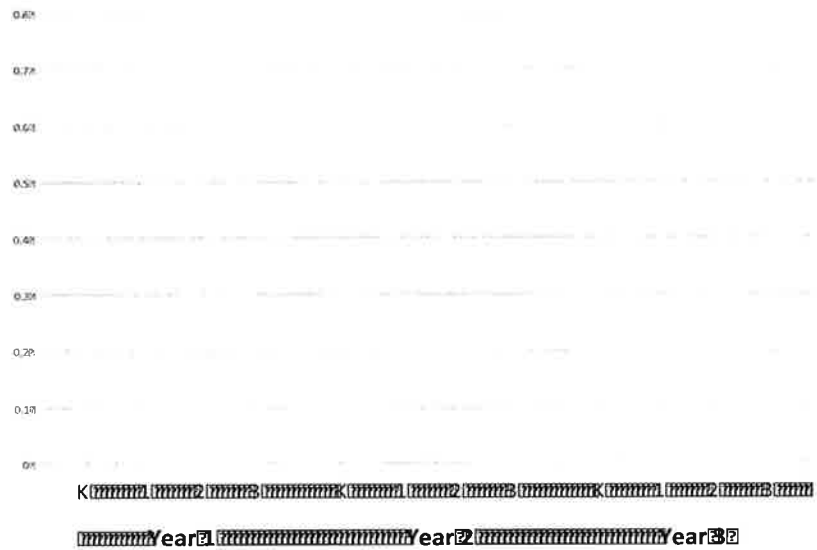
- Commitment to K-3 reading as a **top priority**
- Comprehensive school-wide reading **plan**
- Strong literacy **leadership**
- High-quality **classroom reading instruction**
- Intensive **reading interventions**
- **Assessments** to inform instruction
- Ongoing **coaching** and **professional development** for teachers
- Strong **family engagement**

We are confident about our investment in literacy in Connecticut because we have been able to conduct rigorous evaluation studies on the effectiveness of the Connecticut Literacy Model in multiple school districts across the state. We've demonstrated that students experience **greater growth in early literacy skills across grade levels and across literacy measures** when their school implements Connecticut's Literacy Model.

For example, we've conducted studies that have shown that:

- Providing comprehensive Tier 1 classroom instruction using reading curricula aligned with the Science of Reading increased reading achievement on key reading outcomes for students in participating schools and that these impacts increased over multiple years of implementation (Olhdam, et al., in press)
- Using validated screening measures to identify students experiencing reading difficulties and providing them with evidence-based small group reading intervention accelerated the reading achievement of students most at risk for future reading failure. (Coyne, et al., 2018)

The graph below shows increases in reading achievement on an aggregate measure of reading for students in four schools in four districts across three years of implementing CT's Literacy Model. (Leonard et al., 2019)



Videos

<https://youtu.be/1E9tvxkpoWU?si=g-90cFSK61Ddv5FK>

https://youtu.be/VrGBJpv9c_I?si=NU4yo0NCzpa_aW3m

https://youtu.be/yea5qE-m3PE?si=Kkr_BBIYkPumRzfz

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Leonard, K., Coyne, M. D., Oldham, A., Burns, D., & Gillis, M. (2019) Implementing MTSS in beginning reading: Tools and systems to support schools and teachers. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 34*(2), 110-117.

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Appendix II

Connecticut Waiver for Approved K-3 Reading Curriculum Models and Programs

The Right to Read act allows boards of education to request a waiver to use an alternative reading curriculum model or program instead of a literacy center-approved one. The Commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), in consultation with the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success Director, must grant the waiver if the Commissioner finds that the alternative model or program otherwise meets the following criteria:

- (1) Evidence and scientifically-based; and
- (2) Focused on competency in the following reading areas:
 - oral language, phonemic awareness
 - phonics, fluency
 - vocabulary
 - rapid automatic name or letter name fluency
 - reading comprehension.

Waiver requests are required include (1) reading assessment data that has been disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, students whose primary language is not English, and students with disabilities and (2) a strategy to address remaining achievement gaps as defined in state law.

Waiver Review Process

March 2023 – April 2023: CSDE reviewed each Waiver Application submitted through an electronic system to ensure each included information mandated by legislation.

May 2023: CSDE partnered with a consultant to assist in establishing the review process. The process included creating a tool that aligned with the legislation in order to capture research-based evidence, documenting the findings, and identifying the areas in which legislative requirements are met or not met.

A rigorous calibration approach was employed to ensure consistency and standardization across the process. The process included:

- Internal training by the consultant on the waiver review tool, which included scoring and building consensus across the review team to calibrate;
- Random quality assurance checks against completed initial and final reviews; and
- Calibration meetings and scoring alignment throughout the process.

June 2023 – August 2023: During the review process, it was revealed that the majority of the applications did not include the publisher and/or year of the programs, curricula models, and resources being utilized.

September 2023 – October 2023: Conducted four informational webinars for districts who requested a waiver and held one-on-one virtual meetings with applicants to discuss findings and feedback.

“Reading at All Costs: All Children Can Read By Fourth Grade”

CT Building On Reading Reform

In our commitment to making life-long learning accessible to all children, the Connecticut Legislative Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, in partnership with the State Department of Education, The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity, The University of Connecticut, Literacy How, The Right to Read Coalition, and The Grossman Foundation, sought to seed, learn from, and grow an intentional set of literacy reforms to significantly narrow the opportunity gap in reading, and the lifelong impacts that follow. The following describes Connecticut’s journey toward making that commitment a reality.

Year 1: Public Act No. 11-85

Initial reforms piloted the use of alternative instruments to assess children’s reading level and building capacity of all teachers in the science of teaching reading.

- Allowed for alternative reading assessment instruments to be tested, designed to be teacher-friendly, efficient, and in-depth, regarding necessary reading interventions.
- Tested how to bring parents in as core customers and partners in their children’s learning.
- Assessed the impact of external coaches on classroom outcomes in reading; and
- Allowed on-going training in scientifically-based reading research and practice for teacher and school administrators.

Year 2: Public Act No. 12-116

Focused a new pilot on the 50% of Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students who were not reading at proficiency. This included individualized reading interventions to help these students move forward successfully.

- Targeted intervention assessed all students in selected schools and rapidly intervened with students whose reading was below proficiency, utilizing:
a) an external literacy coach, b) four reading interventionists per schools, c) rigorous and on-going assessments, d) prompt and proven, research-based interventions, e) summer school with focus on reading excellence, and f) a focus on partnering with parents on reading.
- Budget allowed the pilot in five sites with expansion of 5 schools per year.
- Began to incorporate statewide reform by:

- Increased expectations at the university level in pre-service of our special education and reading specialist students who will have to pass a test in the science of teaching reading before they can work in CT schools.
- Development of new reading assessment tools, a professional development system in reading, incentives for schools that improve reading performance, higher education improvements in oral language and early literacy for pre-service teachers; and
- Explicit transition reporting between early childhood and kindergarten teachers to assist young children in their early language skills.

Year 3: Public Act No. 13-245

Focused on professional development to improve knowledge of teaching reading and increase real-world classroom exposure, expanding the interventions that were successful over the last two years.

- A K-3 reading survey of our current teachers to help us to understand what they know and need to know about teaching reading. This asset-based approach was intended to help create a professional development plan with targeted support and information tailored to the school or grade.
- Allowed for Alliance Districts to choose to close the achievement gap through improvements in reading instruction by using the model emerging from the last three pilot years.

Year 4: Leadership and Resources to Embed and Expand

Focused on building on the results and learning from the ongoing, now-consolidated reading pilots to:

- Hired a Chief Reading Officer at SDE to build internal leadership that focuses exclusively on literacy.
- Focused on research-driven methods of teaching reading and intervening when students need focused or advanced help and implementing those reading interventions consistently.
- Developed and implemented leadership training modules with teacher leaders, principals, district reading coordinators and superintendents to create and sustain reading improvement in their schools and districts. This is designed to include statewide monthly training courses as well as embedded support at the district and school level.
- Expanded resources to bring the multi-tier reading intervention model to scale in the Alliance Districts and across the state through a reading plan; and
- Utilized modern literacy assessment instruments that closely and periodically monitor a student's reading level and guide individualized interventions.

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We are so pleased to see many aspects of our bill represented in the legislation before you today. House Bill 998 uses a three-pronged approach to systematizing early literacy in Pennsylvania by establishing a state-approved list of evidence-based reading curricula; using aligned screeners to identify struggling readers; and establishing intervention protocols based upon that screening data.

From an outsider's perspective, but one who is on this journey with you, you are on the right path. I know firsthand the difference that a high-quality education can make in someone's life.

In quoting Representatives Justin Fleming and Jason Ortity in their co-sponsorship memoranda, "This work takes courage, heart and will require leadership." I applaud you for having the political will to do what's necessary to open doors of opportunities for all students in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to testify today.

Connecticut Literacy Model

The Connecticut Literacy Model (CTLM) includes the essential components of a comprehensive multi-tiered framework for supporting reading success for all students in grades K-3 aligned with the Science of Reading. It includes the following critical features:

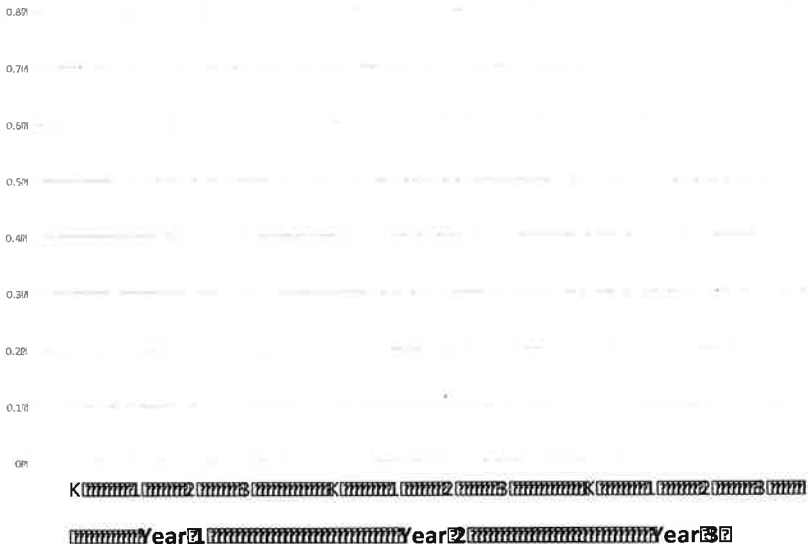
- Commitment to K-3 reading as a **top priority**
- Comprehensive school-wide reading **plan**
- Strong literacy **leadership**
- High-quality **classroom reading instruction**
- Intensive **reading interventions**
- **Assessments** to inform instruction
- Ongoing **coaching** and **professional development** for teachers
- Strong **family engagement**

We are confident about our investment in literacy in Connecticut because we have been able to conduct rigorous evaluation studies on the effectiveness of the Connecticut Literacy Model in multiple school districts across the state. We've demonstrated that students experience **greater growth in early literacy skills across grade levels and across literacy measures** when their school implements Connecticut's Literacy Model.

For example, we've conducted studies that have shown that:

- Providing **comprehensive Tier 1 classroom instruction** using reading curricula aligned with the Science of Reading increased reading achievement on key reading outcomes for students in participating schools and that these impacts increased over multiple years of implementation (Olhdam, et al., in press)
- Using **validated screening measures** to identify students experiencing reading difficulties and providing them with **evidence-based small group reading intervention** accelerated the reading achievement of students most at risk for future reading failure. (Coyne, et al., 2018)

The graph below shows increases in reading achievement on an aggregate measure of reading for students in four schools in four districts across three years of implementing CT's Literacy Model. (Leonard et al., 2019)



Videos

<https://youtu.be/1E9tvxkpoWU?si=g-90cFSK61Ddv5FK>

https://youtu.be/VrGBJpv9c_I?si=NU4yo0NCzpa_aW3m

https://youtu.be/yea5qE-m3PE?si=Kkr_BBIYkPumRzfz

References

Coyne, M. D., Oldham, A., Dougherty, S.M., Leonard, K., Koriakin, T., Gage, N. Burns, D., & Gillis, M. (2018). Evaluating the Impact of Supplemental Reading Intervention within an MTSS or RTI Reading Reform Initiative Using a Regression Discontinuity Design. *Exceptional Children, 84*, 350-367.

Leonard, K., Coyne, M. D., Oldham, A., Burns, D., & Gillis, M. (2019) Implementing MTSS in beginning reading: Tools and systems to support schools and teachers. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 34*(2), 110-117.

Oldham, A., Coyne, M. D., Gage, N. A., Burns, D., Leonard, K., Gillis, M., Hickey, M. W., & White, J. (in press). The Effects of Comprehensive and Coordinated Tier 1 Classroom Reading Instruction Implemented within an Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) Framework. *The Elementary School Journal*.

Appendix II

Connecticut Waiver for Approved K-3 Reading Curriculum Models and Programs

The Right to Read act allows boards of education to request a waiver to use an alternative reading curriculum model or program instead of a literacy center-approved one. The Commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), in consultation with the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success Director, must grant the waiver if the Commissioner finds that the alternative model or program otherwise meets the following criteria:

- (1) Evidence and scientifically-based; and
- (2) Focused on competency in the following reading areas:
 - oral language, phonemic awareness
 - phonics, fluency
 - vocabulary
 - rapid automatic name or letter name fluency
 - reading comprehension.

Waiver requests are required include (1) reading assessment data that has been disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, students whose primary language is not English, and students with disabilities and (2) a strategy to address remaining achievement gaps as defined in state law.

Waiver Review Process

March 2023 – April 2023: CSDE reviewed each Waiver Application submitted through an electronic system to ensure each included information mandated by legislation.

May 2023: CSDE partnered with a consultant to assist in establishing the review process. The process included creating a tool that aligned with the legislation in order to capture research-based evidence, documenting the findings, and identifying the areas in which legislative requirements are met or not met.

A rigorous calibration approach was employed to ensure consistency and standardization across the process. The process included:

- Internal training by the consultant on the waiver review tool, which included scoring and building consensus across the review team to calibrate;
- Random quality assurance checks against completed initial and final reviews; and
- Calibration meetings and scoring alignment throughout the process.

June 2023 – August 2023: During the review process, it was revealed that the majority of the applications did not include the publisher and/or year of the programs, curricula models, and resources being utilized.

September 2023 – October 2023: Conducted four informational webinars for districts who requested a waiver and held one-on-one virtual meetings with applicants to discuss findings and feedback.

“Reading at All Costs: All Children Can Read By Fourth Grade”

CT Building On Reading Reform

In our commitment to making life-long learning accessible to all children, the Connecticut Legislative Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, in partnership with the State Department of Education, The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity, The University of Connecticut, Literacy How, The Right to Read Coalition, and The Grossman Foundation, sought to seed, learn from, and grow an intentional set of literacy reforms to significantly narrow the opportunity gap in reading, and the lifelong impacts that follow. The following describes Connecticut's journey toward making that commitment a reality.

Year 1: Public Act No. 11-85

Initial reforms piloted the use of alternative instruments to assess children's reading level and building capacity of all teachers in the science of teaching reading.

- Allowed for alternative reading assessment instruments to be tested, designed to be teacher-friendly, efficient, and in-depth, regarding necessary reading interventions.
- Tested how to bring parents in as core customers and partners in their children's learning.
- Assessed the impact of external coaches on classroom outcomes in reading; and
- Allowed on-going training in scientifically-based reading research and practice for teacher and school administrators.

Year 2: Public Act No. 12-116

Focused a new pilot on the 50% of Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students who were not reading at proficiency. This included individualized reading interventions to help these students move forward successfully.

- Targeted intervention assessed all students in selected schools and rapidly intervened with students whose reading was below proficiency, utilizing:
a) an external literacy coach, b) four reading interventionists per schools, c) rigorous and on-going assessments, d) prompt and proven, research-based interventions, e) summer school with focus on reading excellence, and f) a focus on partnering with parents on reading.
- Budget allowed the pilot in five sites with expansion of 5 schools per year.
- Began to incorporate statewide reform by:

- Increased expectations at the university level in pre-service of our special education and reading specialist students who will have to pass a test in the science of teaching reading before they can work in CT schools.
- Development of new reading assessment tools, a professional development system in reading, incentives for schools that improve reading performance, higher education improvements in oral language and early literacy for pre-service teachers; and
- Explicit transition reporting between early childhood and kindergarten teachers to assist young children in their early language skills.

Year 3: Public Act No. 13-245

Focused on professional development to improve knowledge of teaching reading and increase real-world classroom exposure, expanding the interventions that were successful over the last two years.

- A K-3 reading survey of our current teachers to help us to understand what they know and need to know about teaching reading. This asset-based approach was intended to help create a professional development plan with targeted support and information tailored to the school or grade.
- Allowed for Alliance Districts to choose to close the achievement gap through improvements in reading instruction by using the model emerging from the last three pilot years.

Year 4: Leadership and Resources to Embed and Expand

Focused on building on the results and learning from the ongoing, now-consolidated reading pilots to:

- Hired a Chief Reading Officer at SDE to build internal leadership that focuses exclusively on literacy.
- Focused on research-driven methods of teaching reading and intervening when students need focused or advanced help and implementing those reading interventions consistently.
- Developed and implemented leadership training modules with teacher leaders, principals, district reading coordinators and superintendents to create and sustain reading improvement in their schools and districts. This is designed to include statewide monthly training courses as well as embedded support at the district and school level.
- Expanded resources to bring the multi-tier reading intervention model to scale in the Alliance Districts and across the state through a reading plan; and
- Utilized modern literacy assessment instruments that closely and periodically monitor a student's reading level and guide individualized interventions.

Year 5: Public Acts No. 15-137; No. 15-97

Enacted the role of Director of Reading Initiatives and enumerated the director's responsibilities.

- The director was to administer the intensive reading instruction program to improve student literacy in kindergarten to grade three.
- The director assisted in the development and administration of the program of professional development for teachers and principals in scientifically based reading research and instruction.
- The director administered the coordinated state-wide reading plan for students in kindergarten to grade three.
- Required that the Commissioner of Education designate an employee of CSDE to provide information and assistance for students relating to the detection and recognition of evidence-based structured literacy interventions for students with dyslexia.

Year 6 Public Act No. 16-163

Required a coordinated family resource center strategy that provided comprehensive childcare services, remedial education, and literacy services.

Year 7: Public Act No. 17-01

Created a reading readiness program, providing tiered supports in early literacy.

- Instructed CSDE to establish a readiness program that provides tiered supports in early literacy to each school district designated as an alliance district, and each school participating in the commissioner's network of schools.
- This included assessment of the reading readiness of students enrolled in kindergarten to grade three.

Year 8: Public Act 18-129

Coordination of State-wide reading plan with the state's two-generational initiative.

- Alignment of early literacy interventions and supports to existing state and local support systems around the family. This strategy recognized that children's success does not exist in a vacuum and is directly related to family and community economic success.

Year 11: Public Acts No. 21-2; No. 21-168

The Connecticut General Assembly enacted "Right to Read," which systematizes a statewide reading response based on the science of reading – by requiring the state to oversee all state and local efforts related to literacy.

- Required that the CSDE establish a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success ("Center") to implement a state-wide plan for students in kindergarten to grade three, develop birth to grade twelve reading success

strategy with the two-generational initiative, support educators through coaching, leadership training with intensive reading instruction. Through the Center we will:

- Have all districts implement early literacy reading curricula that are evidence-based and approved by the Center. Implement a coordinated state-wide reading plan for K-3.
- Research and develop a birth-to-12 reading success strategy, in collaboration with the Office of Early Childhood.
- Support local boards of education and district leadership in improving reading outcomes for K-5 students.
- Support teachers, schools, and districts through coaching, leadership training, professional development, parental engagement, and technical assistance consistent with the state's intensive reading instruction program.
- Provide independent, random reviews of how districts are implementing the approved PreK-3 reading curricula and assessments.
- Publicly report the reading curricula being implemented by each district. Maintain a website about the state's intensive reading instruction program. Collaborate with institutions of higher education to ensure aligned teacher preparation. Publicly report the progress made by teacher preparation programs.
- Established an Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities within the Department of Education, reporting compliance verification, and reading assessments.

Year 12 (2022): CSDE Launches Science of Reading Masterclass

The CSDE initiates the new Science of Reading (SOR) Masterclass that provides professional learning for educators at participating districts.

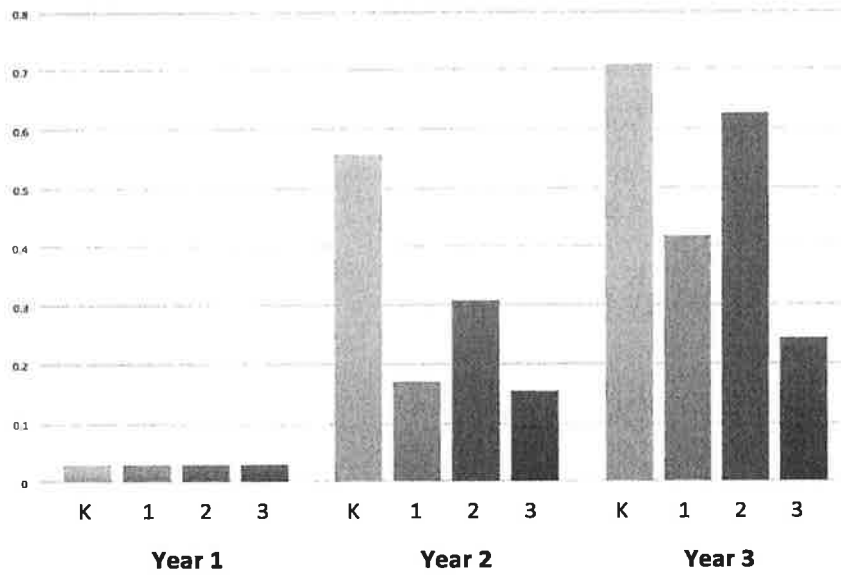
- The masterclass provides professional development for 11 participating districts.
- This masterclass is funded by investments from \$4.5 million in American Rescue Plan (ARP), Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds.
- This is a professional learning opportunity, co-created with Connecticut Association of School Superintendents to develop local capacity for Sor and components of comprehensive K-3 literacy instruction.

Year 13 (2023): Public Act 23-167

For the school years beginning July 1, 2023, and July 1, 2024, any local or regional board of education that has not been provided with a wavier and is not fully implementing a comprehensive reading curriculum model or program for grades kindergarten to grade three, is required to begin partial

implementation of the comprehensive reading curriculum model or program.

- For the school year beginning July 1, 2025, and each school year thereafter, each local and regional board of education is **required to fully implement** the comprehensive reading curriculum model or program.



House Education Committee

House Bill 998

Monday, November 13, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Schweyer and Chairman Topper, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jennifer Hotsko. I have been teaching primary age students since 1996. I am currently a reading specialist at a school district in Dauphin County. I work with kindergarten, first and second grade students. I am testifying in favor of House Bill 998.

I am one of two reading specialists in a building with approximately 800 students. As reading specialists, our primary duty is to provide direct and explicit small group reading intervention to students. We do this by using evidence-based reading materials. Our responsibilities, however, reach beyond teaching. In order to choose which students are in need of intervention, we begin by scheduling and administering both screening and diagnostic assessments to all students. We then compile the scores in a data management document and analyze that data to plan for our reading intervention. After a need for intervention has been established and groups have been formed, we continue to progress monitor all the students who are below the benchmark scores on our initial screener once per six-day cycle. We adjust students' reading instruction based on the data we constantly collect. After the initial administration of our universal screener, we reassess all students two more times throughout the year. Other tasks we perform include serving on our building's Multi-Tiered System of Support, or MTSS, team, developing and providing professional development for district staff, and providing support to the classroom teachers.

I recently had the opportunity to attend a training concerning Act 49. Act 49 will require structured literacy to be integrated into educator preparation programs and professional development programs for all school employees who hold an instructional certificate in early childhood, elementary, and middle school education, pre-K to 12 special education, English as a second language, and reading specialist. Briefly, structured literacy is an approach to teaching reading that is based on the Science of Reading research. At the training, studies and statistics were presented that clearly illustrate the need for quality reading instruction for all students, especially at the early levels. One of the most telling findings is that a student not reading by the end of third grade is four times less likely to graduate high school on time (www.edweek.org). Add to that a study conducted at Northeastern University that found that high school dropouts were 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than college graduates and that 85% of juvenile offenders have reading problems (www.begin Toread.com). Based on these figures, it is evident that students must acquire important literacy skills at an early age. The good news is that early intervention can help students to become proficient at literacy skills and can set students on the path to success. A study found that 90% of children with reading difficulties will achieve grade level in reading if they receive help in first grade. 75% of children whose help is delayed to age 9 or later continue to struggle throughout their school career. If help is given in fourth grade, rather than in kindergarten, it takes four times as long to improve the same skills by the same amount (Hall, S. (2009). Is It a Reading Disorder or Developmental Lag?). According to the National Institutes of Health, 95% of poor readers can be brought up to grade level if they receive effective reading intervention early on in their school career. These statistics, again, show that early intervention is key to student success.

Schools are facing numerous challenges when providing meaningful literacy instruction for all students. One of the biggest obstacles when intervening is the sheer number of students who are in need of

intensive reading intervention. This need can be attributed to a myriad of reasons. It is nearly impossible for reading specialists alone to provide intervention to all the students who need help. To illustrate this fact, I provide the following data from my own school. Keep in mind, there are only two reading specialists in the building where I teach.

Beginning of School Year	# of students in need of intervention	% of K-2 population
2020	257	42%
2021	318	43%
2022	356	48%
2023	309	42%

These statistics are not unique to my building or school district. Reading specialists from other districts would tell you that they are seeing the same kind of data in their schools.

Another challenge that is currently affecting schools, and as a result literacy instruction, is the lack of individuals entering the teaching profession. The number of people who are training to be educators has dropped by one third since 2010 (www.businessinsider.com). Couple this with the increased number of people who are leaving the profession, and we are seeing a teacher shortage. Finding substitute teachers is becoming increasingly difficult. In many districts, reading specialists are being pulled to act as substitutes to cover classes or perform other duties that take away from their ability to effectively work with students.

To help bolster the number of students who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade it is critical that an emphasis be placed on early reading instruction. While some children do not attend preschool, many do. Providing education to our preschools and pre-k instructors on the importance of building early literacy skills may result in more kindergarteners coming to school with foundational skills that are critical to learning to read. Providing education opportunities through the schools for parents of young children on the importance of building early literacy skills may also have a positive impact on the number of struggling readers. Also, providing funding to allow school districts to hire more reading specialists, to purchase evidence-based teaching materials, and to provide additional professional development in the area of literacy would allow more students to receive the help they so desperately need.

I am fortunate to teach in a school that uses a universal screener to identify struggling readers. The data we collect allows us to effectively group students and provide intervention using evidence-based practices. These components are necessary pieces to successful literacy instruction. Schools cannot change who walk through their doors at the beginning of each school year, so they need to be prepared to meet the students where they are academically. With the proper facets in place, it is possible for all students to be proficient readers. House Bill 998 will help to ensure that all students get the quality literacy instruction that they deserve.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 998.

Jennifer Hotsko

jehotsko@yahoo.com



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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**House Education Committee
Public Hearing on Assessments
November 13, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) role in administering student assessments. My name is Dr. Carrie Rowe, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Joining me today is Brian Campbell, Director of PDE's Bureau of Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction, and Brian Truesdale, Chief of PDE's Division of Assessment and Accountability.

Background

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2001 to address apparent inequities of the country's public school systems. The explicit goal of NCLB was to eliminate disparities of school quality for urban and low-income students. Arguably the most important component of NCLB was a requirement that every state create and adopt a statewide, universal set of academic standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. These standards represented a minimum set of expectations for all educators and students. All students were expected to become proficient in the academic material described in the standards, and schools were expected to educate their students accordingly.

NCLB required assessments to measure progress toward the goal of universal proficiency and to hold educators accountable for ensuring that goal be accomplished. NCLB required that every state create and administer a set of rigorous assessments aligned to its statewide standards so that it could know whether its efforts towards universal proficiency were working. When students did not achieve proficiency on the assessments, their schools were sanctioned with prescriptive "school improvement" mandates.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced No Child Left Behind. The new law largely affirms the core tenants of NCLB in that every state is required to maintain a statewide, universal set of academic standards, and that every state must administer a set of rigorous assessments aligned to those standards. The goal of universal proficiency is still apparent; however, ESSA adds a requirement to measure disparity between student groups, including economically disadvantaged students; children with disabilities; English learners; and students from major racial and ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Hispanic, Multi-Racial, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian Islander or Other Pacific Islander, and White). ESSA allows states to customize interventions to the unique needs of schools.

Pennsylvania requires schools to administer only the minimum number of assessments required by ESSA. The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams (PSSA) fulfill the ESSA requirements for English Language Arts, Math, and Science in elementary and middle levels. PSSAs are grade-level general assessments, covering a range of material learned throughout the year. The Commonwealth uses Keystone Exams to satisfy ESSA's requirement for high school assessments. Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments administered at the end of the related coursework. Students must take each Keystone Exam at least once by the end of 11th grade. ESSA allows each state to adopt an alternate set of academic



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standards for the 1% of students with the most profound cognitive disabilities. Accordingly, each state may then administer assessments aligned with the alternate standards. The Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA) is Pennsylvania's alternate assessments for all applicable grades. Pennsylvania minimizes testing time on those assessments by asking as few questions as can be technically defended in a peer review. Moreover, PDE has reduced the number of items on the PSSA and Keystone exams twice in the last six years.

Federal Requirements

As part of efforts to ensure that all states are meeting the statutory and regulatory requirements, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) requires all states to undergo peer review of their assessment systems. These statutory and regulatory requirements ensure the technical quality and validity of statewide assessments. Through this peer review process, states must demonstrate how their assessment systems provide valid and reliable information on student performance relative to state content and performance standards and provide valid and reliable information on the English proficiency of a state's English learners.

Like every state, Pennsylvania receives hundreds of millions of dollars of federal education funding. These dollars come to Pennsylvania via a series of contracts with USDE. Rules governing those contracts are described in ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Both acts require states to adopt and maintain a set of high-quality standardized academic assessments. This requirement is non-negotiable. While states are given some flexibility to create or adopt assessments suited to their needs, states do not have an option to forego administering statewide assessments. Accordingly, all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have an assessment program used to satisfy federal statutory testing requirements.

Federal law governing standardized testing has three essential requirements:

1. Each state must administer a set of high-quality standardized tests.
2. Each state must report the results of those tests to students and parents, USDE, and the public.
3. Each state must use state assessment results as a substantial factor when deciding which schools to designate for school improvement.

The range of enforcement measures USDE may take for non-compliance includes withholding funding administered through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In 2022, Pennsylvania received \$18,230,122 as the state education agency and local education agencies (LEA) received \$689,558,769. This funding could be in jeopardy if the state or LEAs were found to be non-compliant.

State Requirements

The administration of the PSSA and Keystone Exams is also required by state law. In addition to meeting federal mandates, Pennsylvania law requires assessment results:

1. Be factored into educator evaluations, in accordance with Act 13 of 2020;
2. Be considered as part of statewide high school graduation requirements, in accordance with Act 158 of 2018; and
3. Be used to assess charter school performance and to determine low-achieving schools for purposes of the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit program.

State testing in all subjects requires less than nine total hours of each student's school year. Concerns of testing time are often the result of local scheduling decisions that ineffectively use the provided testing



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windows or that build in additional time for isolated test review or student rewards - practices that are unproven to impact success.

Many local policies have used test scores as a “gatekeeper” to enrollment into higher-level math courses, magnet schooling, career and technical education programs, honors/gifted courses, and remedial instruction. PDE does not have the authority to prohibit schools from using assessment results for these or other purposes, and PDE has actively discouraged the use of PSSA and Keystone data for punitive student scheduling or programming. Using local data and other factors would be a more appropriate measure for making these enrollment and instruction decisions.

Each additional use of assessment results contributes to an overall concern that standardized tests carry too much weight in the contemporary education system. Eliminating or altering these policies would likely reduce the high-stakes consequences teachers and communities perceive about testing and more closely align the test and results with their intended purpose and therefore reduce the Commonwealth’s reliance on those assessments.

State Contract

PDE uses a competitive procurement process to contract with third-party vendors for the exams and tools that make-up the commonwealth’s state system of assessment. Data Recognition Corporation is the primary assessment vendor, supplying PSSAs, Keystone Exams, and Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT). The University of Wisconsin holds the current contract to supply the Commonwealth’s English Language proficiency assessment, the Access for ELs. Double Line M is contracted to provide the PASA.

The annual contractual value of the agreement with Data Recognition Corporation is \$42 million, although actual costs have typically run closer to \$40.5 million in recent years. These savings were mostly due to increased use of online testing and lower than estimated student enrollment counts. PDE contracts out nearly all elements of the assessment program, including test development, printing, shipping, helpdesk, logistics management, scoring, data processing and compilation, and reporting of scores. Developing the tests in-house would be prohibitively expensive. PDE also does not have the technical expertise to design and implement the tests.

Nationwide comparisons can be difficult to make because states have different ways of managing their programs. Some outsource most of the effort like Pennsylvania. Others directly manage their entire programs through government agencies or state-run institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, Assessment Solutions Group (ASG), a third-party organization, attempts to calculate and publish this comparison each year. In ASG’s most recent reporting, Pennsylvania’s assessment system ranked 38th in cost per student, meaning only 12 states boast less expensive systems.

Opting Out of Assessments

Parental opting out has remained relatively flat in Pennsylvania. Since 2016, an average of 1.2% of students (approximately 12,000 out of 1 million) were opted out of mandatory assessments each year. That number increased to 2% in 2021 but dropped back to 1% by 2023.

Total participation in assessments has declined in recent years, though it climbed in 2023. In 2016, total participation was 97%. It dropped as low as 70.2% in 2021 and has since rebounded to 92.6% in 2022 and 94.1% in 2023. While this is encouraging, it should be noted that the federal minimum threshold is 95%.



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Potential Changes

Federal law requires that each state have a system of assessments, but it gives each state latitude to design their system. All states' assessment systems have relied upon, and continue to rely upon, summative assessments in large part. Statewide summative assessments usually take the form of a single assessment on the entire year's content standards taken near the end of the school year. PDE continually reevaluates Pennsylvania's state assessment system to determine how best to provide an improved experience for students and teachers without violating the reliability of the exam or the integrity of USDE's peer review. Some of the changes that PDE is currently studying for compliance and feasibility are ways to increase the adoption of online administration.

Currently, Pennsylvania is one of three states with the lowest online administration rate, making it uniquely challenging to provide timely scores to students and educators. Online testing has several noteworthy advantages over the current paper tests. PDE can construct online assessments that include organic, performance-based tasks (rather than multiple choice or essay questions) that more accurately assess student learning. Moving to online testing also makes it possible to greatly increase the speed with which results are reported back to schools. Schools currently receive scoring reports throughout the summer months. Online testing eliminates shipping, scanning, sorting, and reconciliation time, making it realistic to expect scoring in less than a month and a likely cost savings to PDE.

We appreciate the House Education Committee providing the Department with the opportunity to provide an overview of Pennsylvania's student assessment system.



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Good morning Chairman Schweyer and members of the House Education Committee,

It is an honor and privilege to appear before you today to share our school district's experience with the Science of Reading and the true potential to finally level the playing field for all children. My name is Dr. Matthew Patterson and I am the assistant superintendent of the West Jefferson Hills School District in Allegheny County. Prior, I served as the Director of Elementary Education in the Corry Area School District. I have served in school administration for 19 years with the last 10 as a district-level administrator in two distinctly different school districts. This experience provided me with the unique opportunity to discuss effective literacy instruction and what is possible when teachers and administrators are equipped with scientific knowledge, and high-quality instructional materials, and possess the collective efficacy that they will make a difference for students.

Like many others across the country, our district long ago adopted a balanced approach to literacy instruction. Children in the youngest grades were leveled together with other readers at the same level and were taught strategies that have since been proven to be the strategies poor readers use. "Get your mouth ready. Guess and check. Look at the picture clues. What makes sense there?" were commonly heard teacher prompts during guided reading time. We now know that this was not an effective method of literacy instruction and in fact, several states have banned these techniques known as the three cueing system, because of their harmful implications. Schools taught skills such as main idea, author's purpose, cause and effect, in isolation hoping that students would become proficient or advanced on the spring state assessments. When those scores fell flat, especially at the national level where they have remained relatively unchanged for decades as indicated by the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), there was plenty of blame to go around. Yet we started another school year with the same instruction and hoped for a different outcome.

When our district began its review process for a new reading series in 2019, we reviewed only the highest-rated products according to Ed Reports. These products had the highest alignment to the Common Core standards and later the Pennsylvania Core Standards which increased the rigor of what students needed to know and be able to do. We knew our students could reach this level but it was not going to be with the same materials, practices, or long-held beliefs about what effective reading instruction was. It is an understatement when I tell you that we simply "did not

confident and truly enjoy teaching reading because they know that what they are doing is working for their students. Anecdotal stories, such as these, are countless in our district and it is because we now understand the science behind effective reading instruction and possess the skills and materials needed to help all children learn to read and read well.

The Science of Reading works for all children and in our district, where all means all. The Science of Reading works for students in Erie's Public Schools, Lake Forest District 67 in Illinois, New Berlin, Wisconsin, Tempe, Arizona, and right next door to us in the Baldwin-Whitehall School District. Dr. Pamela Kastner is quoted as saying, "All teachers deserve to know the science of reading, and all students deserve to have a teacher who knows it." Succeeding in finally giving all children the gift of reading is within our grasp in this country but it takes courage, leadership, and knowledge at every level to make this a reality. It also takes resources.

The West Jefferson Hills School District is committed to providing its students with the best learning experience possible. In a testament to that commitment, the district has invested nearly \$1,000,000 in local and state funds in our literacy program over the last five years. We have invested in high-quality instructional materials for our teachers; ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators, and job-embedded coaching support. We have opened our doors and classrooms to more than 70 school districts from all over the country in order to share and learn together. Nearly 45 Pennsylvania School Districts were represented at our first-ever, Science of Reading Educator Summit in October. Educators all across the country, especially in southwestern Pennsylvania, are embracing change and allowing science to guide their work.

By embracing the science of reading and implementing evidence-based practices, we can improve literacy outcomes, narrow achievement gaps, and foster that ever-elusive love of reading among our students. Education is the cornerstone of our society and at the core is the responsibility to teach a child to read. There is no greater purpose in our schools than that. We have the scientific knowledge, we have the tools and we have the will to make sure that every child leaves our schools with the ability to read and become a successful, productive, and happy member of society. We can literally alter the trajectory of a child's life simply by providing effective literacy instruction grounded in the latest cognitive and neuroscience available to our profession.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning on this critical issue. I appreciate this committee, the Senate Education Committee, and all of our elected representatives who believe in and support effective literacy instruction for all Pennsylvania students.

Thank you for your steadfast commitment to ensuring that this important topic receives the attention it deserves. Thank you.

Matthew J. Patterson
Assistant Superintendent
West Jefferson Hills School District

Good morning.

Good morning members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for being here and for allowing me to speak. My name is Megan Gierka, and I am acting as a private citizen and staunch literacy advocate and do not represent any organization in any official capacity.

I represent troves of educators across this great Commonwealth and stand on the shoulders of mentors and colleagues who have advanced this work and mission. I thank them for giving me their knowledge and I thank you for giving me this microphone.

I come to you with a decade of experience in Title I schools in underserved communities. I've worn the hats of elementary teacher, reading specialist, instructional coach, and curriculum leader throughout this great Commonwealth in the Lehigh Valley, anthracite coal region, and across the Susquehanna river at Cumberland Valley SD.

Currently, I work at the AIM Institute for Learning and Research near Philadelphia as a content developer and teacher trainer where I've partnered with top researchers to develop courses, most recently on English Learners and early literacy acquisition.

I do quite a bit of traveling in my role. I just returned from two weeks in the beautiful state of Mississippi. Wherever I go, red, blue, and purple states - from Rhode Island to Mississippi to North Dakota to Louisiana - the states who are making this a priority are seeing the greatest gains.

States like Mississippi have been at this work for over a decade. 10 years in the making... 10 years since I started teaching in this state.

And today, I want to talk to you about **time**.

Teachers make over 1,500 educational decisions each day (EdWeek, 2021). This equates to about 3 decisions per minute. Can I go to the bathroom? Can you message my mom and ask her to bring my gym sneakers? When is recess? What does 'lexicon' mean?

Thankfully, with all of those decisions, I got quite a long break as a teacher: 40 minutes per day. Honestly, I am grateful for my union (PSEA) that ensured that I got those precious minutes every day. 40 minutes to plan instruction for over 30 kids with



varying needs, answer the piling emails, and Google how to differentiate a 4th grade science lesson for students of varying reading abilities.

But imagine, 40 minutes to prepare and plan for something as critical as literacy instruction. Easy enough, right?

What is Literacy?

Literacy is turning the squiggles on a page into meaning. It's an invention only a few thousand years old which rearranged the very structures of our brain, expanded the ways we were able to think, and altered the path of our human species (Wolf).

Thousands of researchers have studied the psychology of reading. Two decades ago, Congress convened a National Reading Panel that analyzed over 100,000 studies from every major discipline, and now we know what works.

Structured literacy, or commonly known as the science of reading, is the consensus from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages (Moats).

And structured literacy is what can solve those societal and generational inequities that the other panelists have detailed. Inequities that exist even a few short miles from here.

[Be My Eyes connection]

Today, that child is a very successful sixth grader, active football player, and fluent reader.

All because our district and some incredible teachers focused on those precious minutes of instructional time.

Time.

Because 5 minutes with that child who only knows a few letter sounds can close the gap of inequity. Explicit, systematic, cumulative structured literacy instruction. Did you know that it takes four times as long to intervene in fourth grade as it does in kindergarten?

- 75% of children whose help is delayed to age nine or later continue to struggle through school (Vellutino et al., 1996).
- 80% of students that are struggling to read at the end of first grade continue to be struggling readers in fourth grade (Sparks et al., 2014).

- Over 95% of our students can read proficiently by the end of first grade if provided with effective curricula and interventions (Torgeson, 2004).

At least 95% of our Pennsylvania students can attain grade level proficiency. Representatives, this is not a partisan issue. As the Oakland-based NAACP activist Kareem Weaver states, literacy is one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time and this legislation is a critical first step in solving that.

Time to ensure those precious minutes of reading instruction are used most effectively.

I'm not that 'kind of doctor' but we can look to medical science to solve this epidemic in our communities. It starts with:

- **Robust Teacher Training**

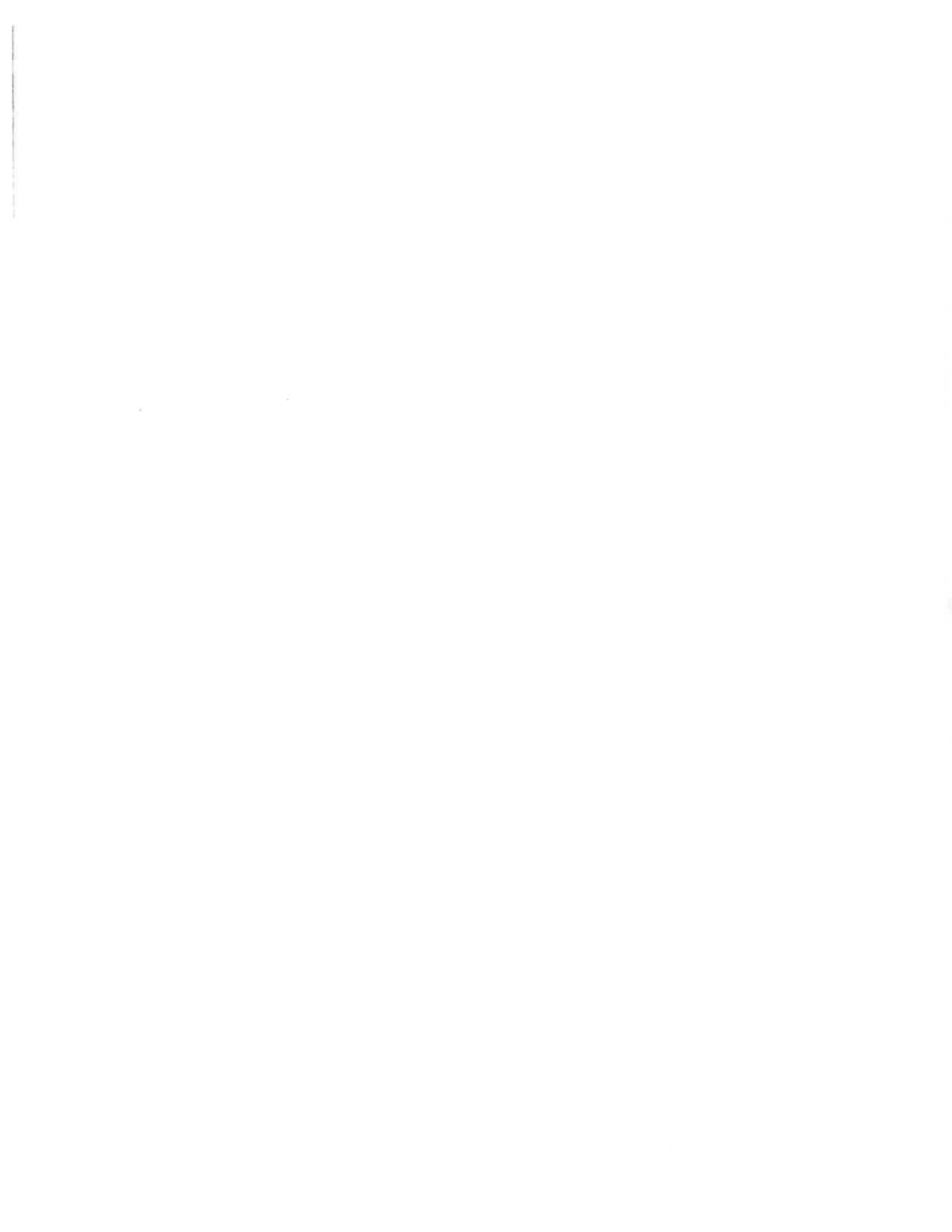
- Over 74% of all teacher preparation programs in PA fail to explicitly cover all five components (NCTQ, May 2020)
- Mississippi: Historically ranked last of the last – 49th ranked state in NAEP in 2013 to 21st in 2022. How? They instituted actionable policy focused on teacher training.
- And please, don't call what they've done a Miracle. It's been a Mississippi marathon, and it takes dedicated work every single day.

- **Great Tools:** The infrastructure needed to ensure our teachers have a tool that has proven efficacy of student success, not something they've downloaded online with their own money. This does not mean every single PA student is using one specific curriculum, but rather, we as literacy experts provide a vetted list that schools can use as a starting point. Those teachers know their kids in their classrooms best, so they will select a great tool that reflects the diversity of their community.

- **Universal Screening:** The 'blood work' of the school, which creates an early identification process to see who is and is not responding to instruction.

- **Intervention:** The 'prescription' so we can provide that intervention during those critical early years.

But imagine, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, what teachers can do with those **40 minutes of precious planning time** if given great curricula and tools? That's where the art of teaching comes in. Maybe it's making a local connection to the Harrisburg students who built bat homes during my science unit or drawing



connections to my students' cultures and families when learning about different regions of the world.

“There’s only one thing more precious than our time, and that’s who we spend it on.”

Let’s focus our time on our **Pennsylvania students and Pennsylvania educators** that we serve so we can ensure all students can attain grade-level literacy expectations. This legislation ensures that teachers have good tools and spend less time creating materials from the ground up, and more time effectively planning and differentiating.

We can achieve a literate society, and it starts with effective policy to drive the change.

I humbly thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of this legislature, and I am open to your questions.

