



Good morning Commissioner Schaefer and members of Work Group 4

My name is Karleen Spitulnik and I am one of the state leaders for Decoding Dyslexia Maryland. We are a grassroots group of parents, teachers and related professionals concerned about the quality of reading instruction in our public schools, and particularly with the limited access to educational interventions for dyslexic students.

The ability to read, write and comprehend text is the foundation for all learning in school. A student needs to read and write to fully participate in every school subject. A student who cannot read and write is at a severe disadvantage and will have difficulty graduating or meeting college and career readiness requirements.

Addressing reading instruction for all student populations is complex (at first) -- Decoding Dyslexia sent a memo to commissioners that is detailed and sizable so I would like to summarize the important priorities listed:

1. Universal Reading Screening --

- a. Screening can quickly predict if a student is at risk for reading difficulties and is the first step in an early warning system alerting teachers to students who may need supplemental instruction or intervention.
- b. Screening is considered an educational best practice but it is not something that Maryland districts do well; few if any districts screen for indicators of dyslexia.
- c. Legislation requiring universal screening and reading interventions for early elementary school students found to be at risk of reading failure will be introduced next session. This legislation will require MSDE to provide guidance and training to school districts and we ask that the foundation formula include funds for screening and implementation.

2. Evidence based foundational reading instruction --

- a. Reading Instruction in many districts is not systematic and explicit instruction that includes instruction in foundational reading skills. Rather reading instruction is often based on the false premise that if students are immersed in good literature, they will just figure out how to read.
- b. Foundational reading skills are necessary for students to develop into skilled readers who can comprehend and use grade level material.
- c. The omission of foundational reading skills disproportionately impacts at risk and struggling students who benefit from explicit and systematic foundational reading instruction.
- d. This high quality instruction exists in Maryland in isolated pockets where well-trained teachers know how to get results.

3. Professional learning for inservice educators who teach reading

- a. During legislative committee hearings, Maryland teachers reported that, they lack the knowledge and practice they need to teach struggling students how to read. Many teachers report seeking out additional coursework and training when they realize they are unprepared, unable to do the job they went to college for.

- b. Baltimore County is in the process of training hundreds of elementary school teachers and middle and high school reading teachers in a course called LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling). This course teaches the science of how a student learns to read -- information these teachers should have been taught in their undergraduate teacher preparation courses,
4. Maryland Undergraduate Teacher Preparation Program Coursework & Certification in Reading
 - a. The only way to truly fix reading instruction in Maryland public school is to train teachers correctly from the start. MSDE has a Reading Standards Revision Workgroup that is looking at the standards for the four reading courses teachers need to take.
 - b. Our Maryland Institutes of Higher ED needs to embrace and teach these new standards. MSDE needs to ensure that faculty who teach the four reading courses have a deep knowledge of reading science and can instruct teacher candidates how to teach struggling readers to read. Even if Maryland only trains 40% of teachers, that is still 40% that won't need to be retrained.

Those are our priorities -- early universal screening, evidence based foundational reading instruction, and improved teacher training in reading for new and current teachers.

I would like to make 2 more points:

1. Special Education needs this same focus on reading instruction. According to Robert Pasternak, a former Assistant Secretary of Education, the number one reason students are referred to special education is because they have fallen behind in reading. The number 2 reason students are referred to special education is for behavior issues -- because the student is unable to read. An increased special education weight is needed to ensure that Special Education teachers and the reading instruction they provide gets the same scrutiny. The silos the separate general education from special education need to come down.
2. As you design the transitional tutoring program, it is also important to also build a tiered instructional framework that will replace tutoring. And finally, there are no shortcuts. The tutors need to have the same expertise in teaching reading as a trained teacher should have.

Maryland will need to spend money to improve reading instruction, and reading outcomes in Maryland, but without effective, consistent, continuous educator training and processes that empower educators to deliver this instruction, student gains in reading and writing literacy will remain elusive.

Thank you.

