

October 30, 2015



Mr. Jack Smith
Interim State Superintendent of Public Schools
Maryland State Department of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Dear Interim State Superintendent Smith:

Recently the Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERs) issued a [guidance letter](#) directed to State and Local Education Agencies (SEAs/LEAs) regarding dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia in both general education and special education settings.

On behalf of Decoding Dyslexia Maryland families, students and teachers, we respectfully request the following:

1. We would like to work with MSDE to break down the guidance into its component parts so that school district personnel, including but not limited to classroom teachers, administrators, IEP and Pupil Services Teams, and others who work with struggling students and those with IEPs, can more easily and consistently incorporate the guidance into their policies, practices and procedures, both written and unwritten.
2. We request that MSDE review state policies, procedures and practices to ensure that they do not prohibit the use of the terms dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia in evaluations, eligibility and IEP documents.
3. We request that MSDE remind school districts about the importance of addressing the unique needs of children with specific learning disabilities resulting from dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia during IEP team meetings and other meetings with parents under IDEA.
4. We further ask that you ensure that all teachers, administration and special education personnel be made aware of the DOE OSER's dyslexia guidance, including MSDE's interpretation of the guidance for Maryland public schools, as requested above.

As you may know from MSDE staff who participate on the Dyslexia Task Force, teachers, parents and adult dyslexics have provided testimony that school personnel routinely refuse to identify and provide interventions for dyslexia. Teachers have offered testimony that they are not thoroughly trained to recognize or offer interventions that work for students with dyslexia.

As a result, many capable students think they are poor readers and writers and their self esteem and effort plummets. Parents who can afford it are forced to purchase outside evaluations, tutoring, and/or send their students to private school to learn to read, write, spell and calculate. This is unfortunate because families should not be forced out of the system because their

students cannot read, write and spell. There is a deep body of evidence that shows reading failure is the main contributor to the school-to-jail pipeline.

The DOE/OSERs guidance acknowledges that dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia are learning disabilities under IDEA and Section 504. It also acknowledges that many students with reading, writing and math difficulties can be helped using existing RtI/MTSS programs in the general education classroom. Research shows that struggling readers, English Language Learners and children in poverty respond well to the same interventions that work for students with dyslexia.

Decoding Dyslexia Maryland is concerned about students with **Dyslexia** as well as **Struggling** readers from all social backgrounds, **Economically disadvantaged students**; **English Language Learners**, and students with other **Specific learning disabilities (SEEDS)**.

We would like to work with MSDE to ensure that Maryland teachers have the tools they need to teach struggling readers and students with learning differences in the general education and special education classroom. Research shows that structured literacy methods, taught by trained teachers, help students with reading differences learn to read, especially when they are identified early.

Pilot programs in Ohio, Indiana, Kansas and Florida show promising gains in reading when teachers understand the structure of the English language and know appropriate implementation strategies. These foundational skills, strategies and practices can be included in Maryland's higher education standards, curriculum and in professional development programs.

Thank you for your consideration of our requests and we look forward to following up with you.

Sincerely,

Laura Schultz
Laura Schultz
Lisa Blottenberger *LB*

State Leaders, Decoding Dyslexia Maryland

cc: Marcella Franczkowski, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Special Education/Early Intervention