



House Education Committee Meeting Minutes

04.13.22

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Chair Williams called the meeting to order at 3:46 p.m. Members present included Vice Chair Chukwuocha and Reps. Briggs King, Bolden, Bush, Collins, Heffernan, Hensley, Lynn, Moore, Morrison, Osienski, Postles, Ramone, Shupe, and Smith. Sen. Sturgeon was also in attendance. For a list of public comments, please see the speaker list below.

Chair Williams introduced **SS 1 for SB 4, AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO EVIDENCE-BASED READING CURRICULA**. With permission from the Chair, Sen. Sturgeon Introduced SS 1 for SB 4.

Sen. Sturgeon explained that SS 1 for SB 4 builds on work from the passage of SB 133 from the 151st General Assembly. SB 133 requires all teacher preparation programs in Delaware to teach prospective elementary teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists how to teach reading using evidence based instructional strategies rooted in the science of reading. SB 133 laid out the central components of evidence-based reading instruction, the core of which are called logical awareness, phonics, fluency, authenticity, vocabulary development and text comprehension. SB 133 was the first step in ensuring all students in the state are taught to read according to the decades of research by neuroscientists and cognitive scientists that focuses on how the brain processes written language. Sen. Sturgeon stated that the committee members were provided a letter of support from Melissa Harrington, a neuroscientist from Stanford University. In the letter, Mrs. Harrington explains the differences between spoken communication and written language. Sen. Sturgeon clarified that spoken utterances occur naturally and can be formed in oral communication simply by exposure, yet this is not true of written language. Phonics instruction uses phonemes and graphemes to understand written language. Unfortunately, not every educator responsible for teaching reading has been trained in this way. Research stated that evidence-backed reading is the most efficient, effective method for teaching reading. Evidence-based reading is necessary for teaching reading to students with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia, which is why the International Dyslexia Association advocates are supportive of this approach.

Sen. Sturgeon stated the for the past two years Delaware's reading proficiency scores have decreased while states that have adopted an evidence-based reading core have increased. She emphasized that SS 1 for SB 4 empowers student and teachers by giving them the tools to learn and teach reading in a manner that does not require outside intervention. Sen. Sturgeon added that contract-based firms use evidence-based reading as their core teaching method. SB 4 requires that the DDOE maintain a list of high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading for adoption by local districts. All K-3 English Language Arts teachers, reading specialists, and special education teachers will receive training in evidence-based

reading. SS 1 for SB 4 also requires that all district schools and charters appoint personnel to ensure the fidelity of these teachings. SS 1 clarifies that this appointed official can be a teacher or an administrative person.

Rep. Heffernan expressed support the bill and recalled her how her daughter struggled with dyslexia. Rep. Heffernan's daughter used a reading assist program to help her to learn how to read that was based in evidence-based instruction. Her daughter is now a graduate from Delaware Technical Community College and is a paraprofessional for the Brandywine School District. Rep. Heffernan requested statistics related to individuals that do become proficient in reading.

Sen. Sturgeon explained that the number of incarcerated people with insufficient reading levels is extremely high. She added that the dropout rate for non-readers is also very high. Currently, only 36 percent of Delaware fourth graders are scoring proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test and only 51 percent of third graders score at or above proficiency in English language arts in State testing. Sen. Sturgeon explained that students that learn to read by the third grade are five times more likely to graduate from high school.

Rep. Heffernan stated that this bill can help students become successful Delaware citizens.

Rep. Smith asked why legislation is needed to change teaching methods when it could be done through curriculum regulation crafted by the DDOE.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that the DDOE is not fond of bills dictating curriculum. She clarified that this bill simply asks the DDOE to compile a list of high-quality material for evidence-based learning. She added that district schools and charters can choose what to take from the list since it is not compulsory and allows for different curricula.

Rep. Smith stated that proficiency in the state is a concern and children should be able to access reading materials in the community as educators cannot solve this issue alone. He added that he would be supporting the bill.

Rep. Bolden asked what happens to the children that do not reach proficiency by the third grade and if this ever leads to placement into special education programs.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that the placement of special education is not only based on reading proficiency. Typically, districts will contract out reading firms to conduct specialized group teaching. Sen. Sturgeon stated that Delaware schools are already contracting firms that are using evidence-based reading and SS1 for SB 4 makes it so teachers are trained in these methods as well.

Chair Williams invited Caroline O'Neil, CEO at the Reading Assist Institute, to speak on the bill.

Ms. O'Neil stated that Reading Assist works with over 600 students across the State. Students are selected after they are flagged through completion of a universal screener. Students are then placed in tiered groups or one-on-one intervention based on their needs. By the end of the year students are brought up to grade level reading. Mrs. O'Neil explained that early childhood intervention reading assistance reduces the need for special education clarifications and

Individualized Education Programs (IEP) designations later on.

Rep. Moore asked if K-3 teachers are accountable for producing outcomes as a part of the evaluation process.

Sen. Sturgeon responded that this is not in the bill.

Rep. Moore asked how a teacher is meant to compare with individual reading instruction when they are in charge of over fifteen students at a time.

Sen. Sturgeon responded that reading instruction for teachers would use similar group instruction methods with the new curriculum of evidence-based phonics. The goal of evidence-based reading is to reduce the number of children that need one-on-one instruction, thus lessening the burden for teachers. Sen. Sturgeon stated that the bill does require districts to identify an individual to oversee the implementation of the program, but there is no punitive piece added to DPAS evaluation for teachers.

Ms. O'Neil stated that 80 percent of students should be able to learn in a group setting. Unfortunately, with current class sizes teachers can face up to 30 to 40 children in a classroom at once. She emphasized the need for reduced intervention once the optimal 80 percent threshold is met.

Rep. Moore asked how the curriculum will be vetted. She mentioned Bookworms, the current curriculum program used for k-3, which is facing criticism.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that 14 Del. C. §1280 lists out curriculum guidelines for evidence-based reading instruction. Future curriculum produced by the DDOE for SS 1 for SB 4 will align with the Code.

Rep. Ramone understood the bill to mention an allowance for schools to bring in outside services if needed.

Sen. Sturgeon affirmed Rep. Ramon's statement.

Rep. Ramone stated that test scores are not truly reflective of the needs of children and the variation in the support students need is great. He added that individual achievement and learning is more important than group success or statistical achievements. He asked if the bill reflected his beliefs.

Ms. O'Neil responded that HB 304 addresses some of Rep. Ramone's concerns as regular screening in K-3 will give more awareness to the students that are falling behind.

Rep. Ramone asked if the bill gave more discretion to the district or the teachers in deciding what curriculum to use.

Sen. Sturgeon responded that the districts oversee the training programs. She stated that the training stipulated by the bill can be built into already existing professional development days or pull-out days.

Rep. Ramone expressed hope in the bill gaining some level of funding before moving forward.

Rep. Briggs King voiced concern for minority students as certain science-based curriculum can be disenfranchising to cultural or social contexts. Rep. Briggs King represents a district that serves 93 percent English Language Learners (ELL). She asked how cultural and social contexts will be protected in an evidence-based teaching approach.

Sen. Sturgeon recalled her experience as an ELL student. She explained that culture is embedded in the teachings of evidence-based reading through vocabulary acquisition. Sen. Sturgeon stated that the science of reading is about knowing how to decode the language with cultural contexts reflected in vocabulary.

Ms. O'Neil stated that the simple view of the science of reading follows language acquisition multiplied by the ability to decode which equals reading fluency. She responded that the cultural aspect is introduced by experiences with educators and materials in their community.

Rep. Briggs King stated that the cycle of what is deemed the best curriculum is never the appropriate response as it has changed many times in the last decade. She voiced her frustration at seeing the proficiency rates for Delaware students continue to decrease.

Rep. Heffernan asked how the teacher associations feel about the bill.

Kristin Dwyer, Director of Legislation and Political Organizing for Delaware State Educators Association (DSEA) responded that DSEA was in contact with its K-3 members. General regard towards the bill ended up in two categories separated by educators who had experience with the science of reading and those who did not. Educators with experience favored the bill while those who had no experience either voiced excitement or did not favor another curriculum being imposed. Ms. Dwyer explained that the overall take of the responses was positive, but that the Committee should be reminded of reasonable and balanced expectations for teachers. She added that professional development for this bill must happen during the contractual day as it is part of the bill.

Rep. Collins stated that he would vote the bill out of committee. He asked if evidence-based reading curriculum listed by the bill is the same in other states and if they are showing favorable results.

Sen. Sturgeon affirmed Rep. Collins statements and added that Mississippi was a good example of a state benefiting from the use of evidence-based reading.

Rep. Collins stated concern for the use of evidence-based reading in the bill and asked if Sen. Sturgeon believed this would be interpreted uniformly.

Sen. Sturgeon responded that evidence-based reading was already described in title 14 of the Delaware Code. She stated that this bill refers to the Code for its definition of evidence-based reading.

Rep. Collins referenced the book *Race to the Bottom* by Luke Rosiak. He stated that this book has heavily influenced his viewpoint on the topic of education.

Rep. Morrison expressed his excitement for the bill as it focuses on early education. He recalled his work with homebound students and their struggles with reading literacy.

Rep. Moore emphasized the importance of reading but voiced concern on how the bill may affect teachers. She asked what the implementation strategy was discussed with the school districts and if this discussion included K-3 educators. Rep. Moore asked for data to back up this curriculum that reflected the needs of Delaware.

Chair Williams stated that in 2003 Delaware ranked 6th in the nation in fourth grade reading scores. Currently, Delaware is ranked at 37th in the nation. Chair Williams requested data on the prison population and found that reading levels are as low as pre-kindergarten and first grade standards. She emphasized the urgency to uplift Delaware students immediately. Chair Williams along with Sen. Sturgeon restated their commitment to seeing this legislation go through and will work with existing literacy laws.

Rep. Moore explained that she encounters students not receiving the help they need every day. She stated that if children do not have the basic skills of decoding and comprehension it effects every aspect of their lives. Rep. Moore clarified that she was not negating the priority of increasing reading proficiency but was unsure that this program would work since conversations with school boards and parents were not held. She added that certain elements were left out of the bill for speed purposes.

Chair Williams responded that there is proof of concept for Delaware as Reading Assist has shown progress with Delaware students.

Ms. O'Neil stated that work on this legislation has been ongoing since the passage of SB 133. There is a working work consisting of representation covering a wide range of Delaware schools. She disagreed that there was a rush on this bill. Ms. O'Neil stated that the DDOE has done work on the states literacy plan which include high quality learning aligned with the science of reading.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that this bill does not preclude any initiative surrounding cultural relevance.

Ms. O'Neil reiterated that Reading Assist has worked with over 600 Delaware students struggling with reading. Reading Assist serves 85 percent minority, 33 percent ELL, and over 80 percent low-income students. She stated that this experience will bode well with all students across the State.

Chair Williams stated that she held conversations in 2018 with parents of struggling readers as her and Secretary Bunting visited charter schools. She reiterated that the focus on this legislation has been happening for years.

Rep. Bolden stated that she supported the bill and asked if the school districts were involved in the working group. She also asked about the request from the DSEA to have training for this program during professional development (PD) days. She noted that PD days are different for each district, and that they should be involved in this progress.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that training must occur during contractual hours and discretion will go to

the districts on when this will happen.

Ms. O'Neil stated that the nine Delaware school districts were not a part of the working group. She noted that representatives from Red Clay Consolidated School District participated.

Rep. Bolden stated that differences in school district needs vary greatly, and this program needs to make sure that it works for all the districts.

Sen. Sturgeon stated that evidence-based reading works with the school districts and Reading Assist has been contracted out by multiple districts in Delaware.

Vice Chair Chukwuocha stated that the late Dr. Terrance Newton, Principal of Warner Elementary School in Wilmington, promoted Reading Assist. Warner Elementary School has established a culture that supports the students and groups them by reading levels. He emphasized that reading literacy will need more than just curriculum to succeed and needs to build on good leadership and a learning culture.

Rep. Shupe described his experience with the difficulties of teaching his daughter how to read. He requested the addition of tracking mechanism that measures the programs impact on students in the bill. Rep. Shupe added that this data could help the State reflect on areas of strength and weakness.

Sen. Sturgeon responded that this data is being collected through statewide assessments.

Rep. Lynn stated that the purpose of this bill is noble, but he expressed concerns over legislation dealing with curriculum. He explained that there is a dangerous precedent in a partisan legislature making policy on curriculum which could lead to the limitation of academic freedoms. He does not believe this bill reaches this level, but it sets an example for a government body to interfere with curriculum. He asked why DDOE cannot make regulation on this topic instead.

Sen. Sturgeon shared Rep. Lynns' initial concern but reasoned that this bill was more geared towards the methodology of evidence-based reading. She responded that she cannot make DDOE act alone.

Dr. Teri Lawler from the DDOE, explained that the Delaware Literacy committee was created in 2018. The committee consisted of representative literacy experts from across the state from every district, charter school, and university. From the committee the 2019 Delaware Literacy Plan was structured with its four strategic intents. Dr. Lawler stated that the DDOE has continuously signaled through this process high quality instructional materials which 11 out of 15 districts have adopted. The DDOE alongside Reading Assist provided educational learning training for any K-3 educators at their request. Out of 5,000 K-3 educators, 500 educators experienced this training during the pandemic. Dr. Teri Lawler explained that the DDOE planned to have training done during school days, but the substitute teacher shortage has hindered this effort. She stated that the DDOE's goal is to support the development of teachers and build capacity of educators to provide evidence-based reading instruction.

Rep. Lynn reiterated his question of why the DDOE does not emplace regulation.

Dr. Lawyer responded that Delaware has locally controlled districts. Districts and charters have the right to make decisions on what their curriculum will be. Of the schools that have not adopted high quality instruction materials, it is typically due to their adoption cycle not being up incurring high costs for the curriculum.

Rep. Lynn asked why action from the General Assembly is needed. Curriculum enshrined in code should only be pervasive to learning that helps the civil education of students and reveal previously veiled history. He believes that this type of bill is not in the scope of the legislature regarding education.

Dr. Lawyer responded that the DDOE is a support agency to the Local Education Agencies (LEA) who have authority to pick and choose curriculum materials.

Rep. Briggs King agreed with Rep. Lynn and added that in the past the General Assembly has meddled in Education to a fault. She stated that this type of policy should be included in the State Standards. Rep. Briggs King voiced concern for the time it will take to make reports and the deprivation of educator instructional time for training. She recalled her experience with her sons' reading difficulties and how he was allowed specialized teaching to advance.

Chair Williams called on Dr. Kymyona Burk, Senior Policy Fellow at the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd).

Dr. Burk stated that passing laws related to literacy are fundamental equity laws. In Mississippi, the purpose of literacy legislation was to clarify best practices and give guidance to make sure procedures were happening uniformly across the state. She added that this law describes to LEAs the curricula that is the state standard and aligns them with how reading education should be. Districts are already required to choose curriculum; this bill would act as a path towards proven high quality learning materials. Dr. Burk described Delaware and Mississippi scores from the NAEP for reading proficiency. In 2003, fourth grade proficiency scores in Delaware ranked 6th in the nation while Mississippi ranked 47th. In 2019, Delaware ranked 37th while Mississippi ranked 29th. Dr. Burk emphasized that Mississippi has seen significantly score increases in their minority students as they begin to outperform the national average for reading literacy. She reiterated that evidence-based reading empowers teachers with the knowledge to response to students that are struggling to read.

Rep. Lynn stated that he would vote for the release of the bill, but still believes that the promotion of legislation that shapes school curriculum sets a dangerous precedent. He urged the committee to heed caution on future curriculum bills.

Chair Williams opened the committee floor for public comment.

Dave Zickafoose described to the committee his experience with his son's learning disabilities. After conversation with Chair Williams, Mr. Zickafoose was connected with a dyslexia interventionist who was able to help his son thrive in school. He emphasized that parents and children need help understanding that assistance is available.

Dr. Tammy Croce, Executive Director for the Delaware Association of School Administrators (DASA), stated that DASA remains neutral on the bill but appreciates the open dialog Sen.

Sturgeon has had with them.

Kathleen Seeman, on behalf of the University of Delaware, explained that the average age of a teacher in America is 49. Mrs. Seeman's teaching undergraduate degree only required two reading classes that did not incorporate how to teach reading using phonics. She explained that later in life she acquired a master's degree that has allowed her to use evidence-based reading practices to teach 100 percent of her students. California passed a dyslexia screening bill and science of reading legislation and believe they will receive an 800 percent return on investment.

Robert Overmiller understood the purpose of the bill but no more than 14 out of 16 school districts would follow this legislation based on past precedent.

Kristen Thornton expressed support for the bill. Ms. Thornton explained that her child was not formally diagnosed with reading disabilities until seventh grade while communicating struggles since kindergarten. She stated that proper identification of struggling readers needs to happen from kindergarten through second grade. Seventy-five percent of students that are not proficient in reading by fourth grade are still not proficient at ninth grade. Ms. Thornton stated that her son would not be struggling in high school now if he was properly diagnosed in kindergarten.

Carrie Antonelli explained that she is the mother of a child that was illiterate until the age of twelve. Ms. Antonelli stated that it was not until her child had access to science-based reading instruction at a private school that she began to read. She added that parents of children in public schools should not have to go without care and voiced support for the bill.

James Spadola, Executive Director for Read-Aloud Delaware, voiced support for the bill. He explained that investment into children's education is an investment into future citizens. He added that lack of literacy is a cumulative process as kids slip through the cracks of education.

Sarah Beth Theaker, Dyslexia Interventionist, shared her experience as a person with dyslexia. It is proven that if children do not obtain a positive self-identity by the age of ten that it is very difficult for this self-identity to form. Ms. Theaker explained that the lack of evidence-based reading is negatively impacting Delaware children.

Chair Williams made an announcement that she would be walking the bill and that Reps. Kowalko, Matthews, and Smith expressed their intention to vote yes for SS1 for SB 4.

A motion was made by Rep. Bush and seconded by Rep. Heffernan to release SS 1 for SB 4 from committee; the motion carried. Yes= 14 (Bolden, Briggs King, Bush, Chukwuocha, Collins, Heffernan, Hensley, Lynn, Morrison, Osienski, Postles, Ramone, Shupe, and Williams; No= 1 (Moore); Absent= 3 (Kowalko, Matthews, and Smith). The bill was released from committee with a F=10, M=7, U=1 vote.

Chair Williams introduced **HB 304, AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO READING COMPETENCY**. HB 304 requires all public-school children grades K-3 to participate in universal reading screenings three times per school year. The screenings will allow for early intervention with the chance to identify reading deficiencies including dyslexia. Chair Williams explained that this bill was endorsed by the DSEA, League of Women Voters of Delaware, and the American Association of University Women.

Chair Williams asked Ms. O'Neil to speak to her involvement with screening and reading intervention.

Ms. O'Neil stated that as part of the process to identify students to work with, Reading Assist utilizes a universal screener. Additionally, Reading Assist partners with over 28 elementary schools to use their existing screening practices. The partnered schools include 28 elementary schools in 4 districts, 3 counties, and 8 charter schools. She added that a secondary screener can be provided based on the quality of the original screener. Reading Assist screens their students three times a year at benchmark along with the schools' practices.

Chair Williams asked Ms. O'Neil to explain how reading screenings work.

Ms. O'Neil responded that a universal screener is a way for schools to identify students that need extra support and adapt curriculum to those students. Screeners typically take three to five minutes and are completed by teachers or reading specialists three times a year.

Chair Williams asked if Reading Assist was seeing results from end of the year screenings.

Ms. O'Neil reiterated the importance of having screenings three times a year so results can be properly tracked. An independent evaluation of Reading Assist assessed that 70 percent of students will reach benchmark and outpace the progress of their classmates by the end of the year.

Chair Williams asked if the implementation of more screenings adds work to a teacher's schedule.

Ms. O'Neil stated that many schools already use a universal screening process, but some are not using the most effective method of screening. This bill does not advocate for any particular screener, just one that aligns to the science of reading.

Rep. Ramone expressed support for children learning of diagnoses that show them that something is not wrong with them.

Rep. Briggs King asked about the capacity of Kent and Sussex County schools to do universal screenings.

Ms. O'Neil responded that Reading Assist is not a screening company for the schools but works with the schools to find high quality screeners. She stated that Delaware schools are already using universal screenings.

Chair Williams stated that the Delaware Literacy Plan already stipulates universal screeners and multi-tier support for students.

Rep. Moore asked why the bill was necessary if schools are already conducting screenings.

Chair Williams explained that this bill provides the state with data and reports to see which schools are making progress. The bill also notifies ongoing screening processes to parents.

Dr. Lawyer stated that the DDOE has implemented multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) regulation since January of 2021. A guiding coalition led the shift from Response to Intervention (RTI) to MTSS. MTSS Regulation states that screenings be done three times a year, the convening of problem-solving teams, and a guide on the implementation of MTSS. Core one instruction is very important for the MTSS, and teachers are being taught this in professional learning. Parent involvement is included in the MTSS system as they are regularly contacted to let them know the progress of their child. Dr. Lawyer stated that the screening process is bigger than one assessment and looks to multiple data points to obtain a good understanding of student performance. Dr. Lawyer added that MTSS is being done by the DDOE and they see replication of regulation in this bill.

Rep. Collins stated that the state should be focused on getting kids excited to learn and not just placing legislation on how to teach children. He believes the General Assembly is on the wrong path trying to fit everyone into a similar mold.

Chair Williams disagreed with Rep. Collins and stated that this bill was made to help all students.

Rep. Morrison stated that looking back on education tends to be nostalgic. He warned against looking at the past as ideal since he had older relatives who never received proper diagnosis of learning disabilities.

Chair Williams opened the committee floor for public comment.

Dave Zickafoose stated that data analyzation is important in education. He emphasized that if his sons learning disabilities were identified sooner than unhappy conversations could have been avoided.

Dr. Tammy Croce from the DASA, thanked Chair Williams for conversations with the Association and looks forward to continued cooperation.

Cathleen Seemen stated that 1 in 5 students in every classroom are dyslexic. She added that 50 percent of all dyslexic people do not recognize that they have a reading disability but internalize notions of self-hate and unintelligence. Ms. Seemen explained her background in reading trauma research and found that it is equivalent to post-traumatic stress disorder seen in veterans. She reiterated comments from the previous bill about California's expected 800 percent return on investment from reading legislation.

Sarah Beth Teaker emphasized reading education is a problem across the country which many states seek to address through legislation. She displayed to the committee examples of 3 dimensional and 2 dimensional objects as they are interpreted differently to the brain.

Robert Overmiller voiced opposition to the bill as he does not think the bill will solve any problems.

Christine Thorton stated that she only received information about her sons learning disabilities after she physically requested it from the schools. Mrs. Thorton reiterated her sons progress under an evidence-based reading program. She emphasized the importance of early intervention

and urged the committee to support the bill.

Lisa Frankel, Founder of the Delaware Chapter of Decoding Dyslexia, expressed support for HB 304. Mrs. Frankel explained that have been working with Chair Williams on reading legislation since 2017. She stated that Delaware students need proper reading intervention in order to succeed in all aspects of school. Early use of screening starting in kindergarten can catch struggling students and provide specific learning instruction.

Susan Miller stated screening and early intervention matters. History of the science of reading has shown that curriculum and teacher knowledge matters. Children need intervention early so specialized instruction can begin to avoid further harm. Ms. Miller advocated for biometrically sound screeners.

Carrie Antonelli expressed support for the bill. Ms. Antonelli stated that reading is a critical life skill and believes that if screening was done earlier on her children, then proper corrective action could have been taken. She explained that at least 21 states have a statute or code that address regular screenings between K-3. She urged the committee to release the bill.

Chair Williams stated her intent to walk the bill to allow for representatives that left to vote on the bill.

A motion was made by Rep. Bush and seconded by Rep. Postles to release HB 304 from committee; the motion carried. Yes= 11 (Bush, Chukwuocha, Collins, Heffernan, Lynn, Moore, Morrison, Osienski, Postles, Ramone, and Williams; No= 0; Absent= 7 (Bolden, Briggs King, Hensley, Kowalko, Matthews, Shupe, and Smith). The bill was released from committee with a F=8, M=5, U=0 vote

Chair Williams adjourned the meeting at 6:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by:

Valeria Coverdale, Legislative Fellow

Speaker List:

Caroline O'Neil, Reading Assist Institute

Carrie Antonelli

Dave Zickafoose

Dr. Kymyona Burk, ExcelinEd

Dr. Tammy Croce, DASA

Dr. Teri Lawler, DDOE

James Spadola, Read-Aloud Delaware

Kathleen Seeman, University of Delaware

Kristen Thorton

Kristina Dwyer, DSEA

Lisa Frankel

Robert Overmiller

Susan Miller

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Public Comment

- 1. SB 4 / Submitted by Liz Parlett Butcher / April 6, 2022, at 10:28 a.m.***
- 2. HB 304 & SB 4 / Submitted by Amy Barry / April 11, 2022, at 4:06 p.m.***
- 3. HB 304 & SB 4 / Submitted by Debbie DeGrosky / April 13, 2022, at 9:45 a.m.***
- 4. HB 304 / Submitted by Christine Gillean / April 13, 2022, at 9:57 a.m.***

April 6, 2022

The Honorable Laura V. Sturgeon
Chair, Senate Education Committee
Legislative Hall
411 Legislative Avenue
Dover, Delaware 19901

Dear Senator Sturgeon and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Liz Parlett Butcher, and I am the director of communications for First State Educate, but I appear before you today as a parent of a struggling reader and to express my support for Senate Bill No. 4. Thank you for sponsoring this legislation, and for posting the bill in the senate education committee today for a vote.

Why isn't Sebastian Reading?

As the mother of four children, I am here today to tell you the story of how my youngest child, Sebastian, who was subsequently diagnosed with dyslexia late in his kindergarten year, responded to curricula aligned to the science of reading. The battles I had to fight to ensure Sebastian was given access to evidence-based curricula in the public school system are not a journey I would wish upon any parent or caregiver.

Let me start by stating that typically I am no fan of mandates, and tend to side with home rule, and believe that all schools and districts should adopt the curricula that works best for their budgets and students. But when you see the literacy proficiency rates in your state continue on a downward spiral, and that you are now ranked behind the state of Mississippi, and 37th in the nation, you have to start mandating that schools and districts adopt evidence based curricula that moves the academic progress needle for children. **Delaware has a reading proficiency crisis on their hands and the first state must act to put student learning first.**

I have heard many in the education and policy making circles incorrectly state that poor literacy rates is something that can be attributed to low-income populations, and children whose parents aren't home to teach them. Sebastian is my youngest of four children, and my other three children were reading on grade level from kindergarten on, and I poured more time, resources and energy into Sebastian than I did with all of my other children. But no matter what I did I couldn't get Sebastian to recognize the alphabet, no matter how many times I reviewed and tried sounding it out with him. His private preschool teacher who had her Ph.D. in early childhood education couldn't get Sebastian to rhyme during circle time, or recognize the lower or upper case letters in the alphabet. Why weren't any of us reaching him? What was wrong with Sebastian? **This wasn't my fault, and I did nothing wrong. I hold a masters degree in public administration and consider my family to be middle income. Throw away all of your preconceived notions that reading starts at home and if a child isn't reading on grade level they must have a poor home life.**

I turned to my local public school district to begin the identification and evaluation process with the child study team. Sebastian qualified for an IEP as a classified preschool child with a disability. In pre-school and kindergarten Sebastian was pulled for group instruction and direct 1:1 reading instruction daily, but we saw no improvement in his proficiency levels. Why?

If I had known then what I now know after extensive research and locating the literacy experts, the answer would have been clear. **Our school district was not using reading curricula aligned to the science of reading. The teachers were relying on guided reading, balanced literacy, whole child instruction,**

cueing, and the wrong curriculum.

The Journey

I kept mentioning the word dyslexia to the team. The research was telling me all of the early warning signs and red flags were present. I was told the diagnosis wouldn't change how they approached instruction, that he was too young, and that this typically isn't diagnosed until the second or third grade. I decided to take matters into my own hands and requested an Independent Education Evaluation (IEE) from the school district for a full diagnostic evaluation from the Ann Robinowitz Center/Laurel School for Dyslexia in Princeton, New Jersey. By this time, Sebastian was already in his late kindergarten year, and we were in the middle of a pandemic. We received a comprehensive educational and diagnostic evaluation from the Ann Robinowitz Center during Sebastian's kindergarten year, where the child study team still refused to utter the word dyslexia, write the diagnosis in Sebastian's IEP or change the curricula offered.

I took the evaluation to Sebastian's pediatrician who reviewed the evaluation and handed me a DX for dyslexia to give to the school. Our special education director then stated this wasn't a diagnosis a pediatrician gave, but rather the job of a neuropsychologist. I then filed for due process, and began vocalizing the importance of utilizing evidence based reading curricula that aligned to the science of reading at my local school board meetings. It wasn't until I started showing up to my local school board meetings that my district's administrators began to act.

I began meeting regularly with the district's superintendent, director of curriculum and special education director, who all assured me they knew they were behind the times. I negotiated a settlement agreement with the district that specifically called for Sebastian to access a trained Orton-Gillingham reading specialist for one hour daily. **Orton-Gillingham aligns to the science of reading. It is a direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive way to teach literacy. This is what Sebastian needed access to right from the start; instead it took me 2 years to fight for him to access this curricula.** We were now at what we call a tier 3 level of intervention. This was during the end of Sebastian's first grade year. Formative and summative assessments showed Sebastian performing at the beginning of kindergarten level in both ELA and Math. The district wanted to promote him to second grade. I fought for retention in the first grade.

Today I am happy to report that for the first time in the three years since I began advocating that Sebastian receive access to curricula aligned to SOR, he is now on grade level. And yet, despite my tireless advocacy, when Sebastian is not being pulled for his daily 1:1 instruction with a trained Orton Gillingham reading specialist, his general education classroom teachers are still utilizing Fountas & Pinnell, balanced literacy and guided reading with his peers. The Fountas and Pinnell curriculum relies on children reading pictures instead of words, and has been outlawed in 14 states. My district is working towards training all of their special education teachers on a curricula aligned to the SOR called LETRS, but why not all teachers? **We know ALL children benefit and respond to curricula that aligns to SOR, but what about the mother, father or caregiver out there who don't know how to fight for their child to be able to access this curriculum? If we truly believe in equity in education, then adopt the mindset that ALL children deserve to learn how to read, not just the select few who will progress no matter what you utilize. How many more students like Sebastian are out there?**

This is my story of one child struggling with reading and literacy in the public education system, and how the right training, curricula and approach made all the difference.

Dear Ms. Williams and Ms. Sturgeon,

Thank you for your work in trying to get this important legislation passed in Delaware. I am trained science teacher, with a masters in middle school education. I have been trained by reading assist as a reading tutor since 2007. It is simply a must that these bills get passed into law.

As you know, there is no evidence that reading to a child will help them learn to read. They might learn to love books, they might develop great oral vocabulary and even might really want to learn to read but yet might not be able to read. There is no such thing as a person just reading. Some brains are able to put the pieces together easier than someone else but everyone benefits from direct, explicit teaching of how to read. Think of it this way. What if you sing to your child every day for 5 years do you just automatically think they too can sing? Probably not. They might like singing but would need to be taught how to sing in key or specific notes and rhythms. Learning to read is not simple for the brain and many of us need some type of instruction on how to decode and comprehend the written language. It is possible for all if we provide sound, science based reading instruction. I have had many students who have been read to regularly and were struggling to read. It is true I have had students who were not read to on a daily basis and they also struggled to read. There is no correlation between someone reading to you and your brain's ability to decode and comprehend what you see written in a book. Delaware is in a state of crisis and we the public can no longer ignore that our students are not being taught to read using the science of reading.

I sincerely hope that the elected officials realize this importance and pass both these bills for our children and that Delaware becomes a leader in reading instruction for all. The biggest disservice we give to our community is not giving them a literate society.

Fondly,
Amy Barry

As a Reading Specialist for over 30 years, I am in total support of House Bill 304 and SB 4. In my work, I have seen the difference it makes when students are identified early and given the benefit of explicit, systematic instruction with a program aligned with the Science of Reading. We need this to happen for our children. They deserve the instruction that will provide them with the skills necessary to become proficient readers.

Thank you for all of your hard work to fight for the students in Delaware!

Debbie DeGrosky



Deborah DeGrosky
Director of Instruction



The American Association of University Women advocates for adequate and equitable funding for and access to quality public education beginning at birth. AAUW Delaware supports **HB 304**:

AN ACT TO AMEND TITLE 14 OF THE DELAWARE CODE RELATING TO READING COMPETENCY.

This Act recognizes advancements in the science of reading and literacy instruction by requiring that all public school students in kindergarten through grade 3 participate in a universal reading screening 3 times each year to identify potential reading deficiencies, including dyslexia, and allow for early intervention and prevention.

This legislation is long overdue and will provide students, teachers, and parents with the tools and data to make appropriate instructional decisions for the children in Delaware. Only 41% of Delaware third graders performed at a proficient level in ELA State Assessment 2021. A logical conclusion is that the Delaware Literacy Plan is ineffective. The addition of universal reading screenings can only enhance the current plan by establishing an accurate picture of early literacy progress of all students that can be used by teachers to provide appropriate instruction and interventions.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures 2019 Report *Pre- Kindergarten – Third Grade Literacy*: “Age and developmentally appropriate assessment for young readers has been recommended by researchers. Assessments should be limited in quantity and duration and be authentic and meaningful to students. Researchers also point out that effective assessments should have a strong research base, be valid and reliable and serve three primary purposes: gathering and using data to inform instruction, screening to identify students in need of intervention and for accountability purposes.”

Additionally, The Education Commission of the States 2020 Policy Brief, *Building a Better K-3 Literacy System* reports: “High-quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment in kindergarten through third grade are necessary to achieve reading proficiency. Assessment identifies a student’s reading challenges and monitors their progress.” The report continues with “Policy actions taken by states since 2017 show that literacy interventions are the most common enacted element of all legislation enacted. Interventions are the result of assessments. Many states created policies to introduce or expand assessment instruments.

.....passed legislation requiring the administration of approved reading assessments to students in grades kindergarten through grade three to monitor student progress throughout the school year and to adjust interventions as needed.”

AAUW Delaware strongly supports the use of universal reading screening three time a year to provide teachers and parents with data necessary for accurate direct instruction and/or necessary interventions. AAUW De endorses **HB 304**. The time is now to act for Delaware’s children.

Christine Gilleen, President AAUW Delaware