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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee Education and Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
B23-0150 – Dyslexia and Other Reading Disabilities Screening and Prevention Pilot Program Act of
2019

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Introduction

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and members of the Committee on Education and Committee of the Whole. My name is Elizabeth Oquendo. I am a Policy Attorney at Children’s Law Center.ⁱ I am testifying today on behalf of Children’s Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With almost 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children’s Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Many of our clients have learning disabilities and special education needs.

Children’s Law Center supports the goals of B23-0150 - the Dyslexia and Other Reading Disabilities Screening and Prevention Pilot Program Act of 2019 (“The Act”) because it will create a universal screening for children in PreK through grade 3 to identify reading disabilities including dyslexia, provide additional professional development for teachers, and allow intervention to begin as early as possible. Dyslexia researchers estimate that 5-10% of school aged children may have dyslexia or a related reading disorder.ⁱⁱ Also, reading disabilities and dyslexia can impact more than just a child’s academic performance. Issues with reading in first grade can create behavioral issues by third gradeⁱⁱⁱ and untreated reading disabilities and dyslexia can negatively impact a child’s social and emotional health.^{iv} For children with dyslexia specifically, providing early intervention has shown to reduce the symptoms of the disorder.^v Therefore, it is of paramount importance that children are universally screened for these disabilities as early as possible to ensure they have the greatest chance to meet their educational goals.

Over 40 states have passed legislation that addresses dyslexia and reading disabilities.^{vi} Neighboring jurisdictions like Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have recognized the need for additional screening, education, and services and have passed legislation that specifically addresses dyslexia.^{vii} Locally, we also recognize the pressing need to ensure that children with reading

disabilities and dyslexia receive universal screening and evidence-based intervention. In the District, although teachers use multiple evaluations and screening tools to evaluate student progress, our experience at Children’s Law Center is that the current system fails to identify some of the children with dyslexia and reading disabilities that public elementary schools seek to serve. We believe that this Act will help to identify children with reading disabilities and dyslexia sooner by using universal screening, provide additional supports for teachers through professional development, and improve literacy for our public school students.

Holistic Universal Screening in All Elementary Schools is Key to Helping as Many Children as Possible

We recommend that universal screening for dyslexia and reading disabilities also include a parent questionnaire to ensure a complete evaluation of the students screened. Apart from an academic evaluation to gauge student progress in key reading measures the universal screening process should also gather information from parents.^{viii} Dyslexia is a heritable condition so gathering information from parents and siblings about their family history of dyslexia is an important step in differentiating dyslexia from other reading disorders.^{ix} Also, a child’s home environment and environmental factors may have a predictive effect on a child’s ability to read. Socioeconomic factors like lack of access to books and parents with low literacy could compound an underlying diagnosis of dyslexia.^x Gathering this information from parents at the screening stage may be critical in helping to differentiate what type of intervention a student may need.

Second, we recommend that all public elementary schools be invited to submit a proposal to participate in the pilot program. As written, the Act requires OSSE to only invite every DCPS elementary school to submit a proposal to participate in the pilot program. We urge the Council to consider allowing all public elementary schools to participate in the pilot program by requiring OSSE to invite every public elementary school to participate.

This Pilot Supports DCPS's Existing Investments in Evaluation Tools and Interventions

The District has already made significant investments in evaluation tools and interventions that are effective and reliable. DCPS students are assessed for foundational reading skills using the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) exam at the beginning, middle and end of each school year in grades K-5.^{xi} The newest version of the DIBELS instrument is validated, peer reviewed, and sensitive enough to screen for Dyslexia specifically.^{xii} There are many other evidence-based and validated screening tools that can be used for PreK- grade 3, and in conjunction with a parent screener may be able to serve as the pilot screener.^{xiii} DCPS has also invested in evidence-based literacy interventions, including the Wilson Reading System which is appropriate for students with dyslexia specifically.^{xiv} Only 19 DCPS schools have access to this particular literacy intervention, therefore ensuring that all schools participating in the pilot have access to reading interventions that can be used to address dyslexia will improve outcomes for students who screen positively.

Providing Additional Professional Development and Training for Teachers Is Key

Universally screening students for reading disabilities and dyslexia must be followed up with reading intervention provided by a teacher who has received specific dyslexia and reading disorder intervention training.^{xv} We support providing in-service training for public school educators participating in the pilot that is specifically designed to promote evidence-based targeted reading interventions for all children in the classroom as well as those struggling with reading disabilities and dyslexia. Jurisdictions like Virginia have instituted a low-cost way to deliver dyslexia and reading disability specific training using an online module.^{xvi} The online curriculum provides information about screening and intervention in an easy to access format. This module is an example of baseline

training and instruction for teachers to ensure they can identify children with reading disabilities and dyslexia and be knowledgeable about available interventions for those children. This Act will create an opportunity for the District to design its own specialized professional development curriculum that meets the needs of its teachers with the input of experts, educators and other key stakeholders.

The Act Should Require the Creation of a Task Force

We recommend the Act require OSSE to convene a Task Force to provide recommendations on the design of the pilot program including a process for universal screening and intervention, pilot program goals and endpoints, creation and dissemination of dyslexia and reading disabilities related content for in-service educational curriculum, evaluation and monitoring plan including collecting baseline data, and scalability.^{xvii} The Task Force should be charged with discrete goals and given a specific timeline to accomplish its work. This will ensure that the pilot may be implemented as soon as possible. A non-exhaustive list of potential Task Force participants may include: representatives from OSSE, DCPS Learning and Teaching, Educators, Instructional Coaches, School Psychologists, General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers from Non-Public Schools, Speech Language Pathologists, Parents, and Experts in Dyslexia and Reading Disorders, Evaluators, and Advocacy Groups. Other jurisdictions have utilized a Task Force to assist with the development and implementation of dyslexia pilot programs. Maryland created its Task Force to Create a Dyslexia Pilot Program whose final report gave guidance on current practices state wide, best practices from other jurisdictions, recommendations on the structure and implementation of the pilot program.^{xviii} We urge the Committee to consider adding a Task Force to the Act in order to ensure that this pilot program is successfully developed and implemented.

Conclusion

Early identification of children with dyslexia and reading disabilities creates life changing opportunities for intervention. Children’s Law Center supports the goals of this Act however we recommend that the Act require OSSE invite all public elementary schools to submit a proposal to participate in the pilot program. Also, the universal screening process should be inclusive of the needs of our local student population and include a parent questionnaire component. We support the creation of evidenced-based teacher training on dyslexia and reading disorders to help to support the Districts overall goal of improving literacy. Finally, we urge that the Committee consider the addition of a Task Force to ensure that the pilot program is developed and implemented using best practices and with input from key stakeholders. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you.

ⁱ Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to advocate for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With almost 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

ⁱⁱ Stefan Samuelsson & Ingvar Lundberg. *The impact of environmental factors on components of reading and dyslexia*. *Annals of Dyslexia* at 201–17. (2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Morgan et. Al. *Are Reading and Behavior Problems Risk Factors for Each Other?*. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* at 417-436. (2018).

^{iv} Michael Ryan. *Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia*. LDonline.org. (2004). Retrieved from: www.ldonline.org/article/19296/.

^v National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance. *Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades* at 13. (2009). Retrieved from: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf.

^{vi} Martha Youman and Nancy Mathers. *Dyslexia Laws in the USA: 2018 Update*. Perspectives on Language and Literacy. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.dyslexicadvantage.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2018-Youman-Mather.pdf>.

^{vii} Maryland and Pennsylvania formed a Task Force to design and implement their Dyslexia Pilot Program. Virginia created teacher training requirements: See: Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program. *Final Report of the Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program*. (December 2016) Retrieved from: <https://improvingliteracy.org/sites/improvingliteracy1.uoregon.edu/files/TASK%20FORCE%20Report%20final.pdf>; See:

Pennsylvania Department of Education. See: *Act 69 of 2014 Dyslexia Screening and Early Literacy Intervention Pilot Program*. (August 2019) Retrieved from: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Data%20and%20Statistics/Dyslexia%20Pilot%20Report.pdf>; and See: Virginia Department of Education. *Dyslexia Training*. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/dyslexia-training/index.shtml>.

^{viii} The International Dyslexia Association. *Universal Screening: K-2 Reading*. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://dyslexiaida.org/universal-screening-k-2-reading/>.

^{ix} Dianne F. Newbury et. al. *Reading and Language Disorders: The Importance of Both Quantity and Quality*. *Genes*. (June 2014) 285-309. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4094934/>.

^x See *The impact of environmental factors on components of reading and dyslexia*.

^{xi} District of Columbia Public Schools. *School Year 2019-2020 Elementary School Assessments Overview (Grades K-5)*. (July 23, 2019). Retrieved from: <https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/SY%202019-20%20Final%20Public-Facing%20Assessments%20Calendar-ES.pdf>.

^{xii} Dibels 8th edition specifically markets itself as being sensitive enough to screen for Dyslexia: See: University of Oregon. *Dibels 8th Edition*. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/assessment/dibels/dibels-eighth-edition>.

^{xiii} The Boston Children’s Hospital Gaab Lab has put together a google sheet describing all the different screeners sensitive enough to screen for dyslexia See: Gaab Lab. *Screening for Reading Impairments*. Retrieved on October 18, 2019: <https://www.gaabl.com/screening-for-reading-impairments>.

^{xiv} Question 35 of the 2018-2019 Budget Oversight Questions for DCPS gives a comprehensive list of all the targeted reading interventions DCPS has invested in and whether or not its evidence based and which students receive the intervention. Retrieved from: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ontbjkp1y9c5cz2/AAAuHwo5FGiLniA5nVlvNU6Va/Performance%20Responses/D.C.%20Public%20Schools?dl=0&preview=Q35+Attachment_SY18-19+Literacy+Interventions.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1.

^{xv} See *Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades*.

^{xvi} Virginia Department of Education. *Dyslexia Training*. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/licensure/dyslexia-training/index.shtml>.

^{xvii} Other jurisdictions have created a Task Force for the design, implementation and evaluation of their Dyslexia programs. The Maryland and Pennsylvania Task Forces have completed their work and their reports explain some of the research and best practices they used to reach their conclusions. These might serve as potential model that OSSE can consider when the Task Force is created.

See: Pennsylvania Department of Education. See: *Act 69 of 2014 Dyslexia Screening and Early Literacy Intervention Pilot Program*. (August 2019) Retrieved from: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Data%20and%20Statistics/Dyslexia%20Pilot%20Report.pdf>. See: Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program. *Final Report of the Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program*. (December 2016). Retrieved from:

<https://improvingliteracy.org/sites/improvingliteracy1.uoregon.edu/files/TASK%20FORCE%20Report%20final.pdf>.

^{xviii} See: Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program. *Final Report of the Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education Program*. (December 2016). Retrieved from:

<https://improvingliteracy.org/sites/improvingliteracy1.uoregon.edu/files/TASK%20FORCE%20Report%20final.pdf>.