



August 10, 2017

Dr. Karen Salmon, Superintendent
Andrew Smarick, President, State Board of Education
Maryland State Department of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Re: Decoding Dyslexia Maryland public comment on Maryland's ESSA Plan

Superintendent Salmon and President Smarick:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Maryland's ESSA Consolidated State Plan. Decoding Dyslexia Maryland is a grassroots movement of parents, teachers and related professionals concerned about access to effective, evidence-based interventions for students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities in our public schools. While our initial focus was students with dyslexia, it has become clear that more than half of Maryland public school students struggle to read, write and spell g and that the same interventions and strategies that work for students with dyslexia also teach non-dyslexic students these skills.

Members of Decoding Dyslexia Maryland, including 4 public school teachers, sat on the Task Force to Study the Implementation of a Dyslexia Education program (Dyslexia Task Force) which submitted its findings and recommendations to the Governor and Legislature in December 2016.. The task force developed the framework for a pilot reading program that includes early identification of reading difficulties in Kindergarten and recommends structured literacy instruction¹ for those identified as at risk for reading failure. The pilot was designed after careful review of best practices from around the country and presentations on the latest research from experts like Dr. Julie Washington, Dr. Laurie Cutting, Dr. Margie Gillis, Dr. William Stixrud, and Dr. Carol Connor. We feel strongly that implementation of the reading pilot program will improve reading outcomes for all students significantly.

With that background, we offer these comments:

Title I, Part A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Education Agencies (LEA) - Statewide Accountability System -- Long-term goals – Academic Achievement

Decoding Dyslexia is concerned that although schools are required under this state plan to increase the percentage of students scoring a 4 or a 5 on the PARCC exams, the state plan does not provide a

¹ Structured literacy: **Structured literacy** instruction is marked by several elements and principles: elements of instruction include: **phonology, sound symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax and semantics** and principles of instruction that are: systematic, sequential, explicit, comprehensive, and individually diagnostic.

framework or guidance on how schools must instruct students differently to improve student achievement. Over the past several decades, the percentage of students reading proficiently based on NAEP scores, have not changed significantly, which leads us to believe that there needs to be a significant change in how reading is taught in the early elementary school grades and how reading is taught to pre-service teacher candidates at Maryland universities. We suggest the following:

1. We suggest that MSDE create and fund a reading pilot program to demonstrate best practices enumerated in the Dyslexia Task Force Report. The pilot would include an early identification protocol that includes 1) Phonemic Awareness, 2) Naming Speed, 3) Letter sound knowledge as well as effective, evidence based interventions for students at risk for reading failure.
2. MSDE should provide training to all primary school teachers, particularly in grades PK-2 on indicators of reading failure, identification of at risk readers, and training in structured literacy instruction and the effective components of reading instruction defined in ESSA and IDEA.

While we applaud Maryland's high expectations for reading and math scores, increasing proficiency by 50% requires a plan. Such a lofty goal cannot be met with good intentions, (research has shown that 95% of all students can learn to read proficiently), LEA's must have a framework that describes and denotes best practices on how to achieve those goals. The measures suggested above will develop teachers' capacity to be proficient instructors of reading and writing, as well creating a sustainable teacher training pipeline where new teachers can learn their craft from expert teachers.

Title II, Part A: Supporting Effective Instruction - Improving Skills of Educators

Decoding Dyslexia supports in-service and pre-service teacher training in effective reading instruction. Many elementary teachers are inadequately prepared to teach young students for whom learning to read and write is difficult (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Joshi, Binks, Hougén, Dahlgren, et al., 2009; Joshi, Binks, Hougén, Dean et al., 2009; Moats, 1994; Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons 2009), yet they may not realize what they do not know and think they are doing what is best for their students (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004; Spear-Swerling, Brucker, & Alfano, 2003, 2005). (Source: [Martha Hougén University of Florida May 2015](#)).

Administrators tell us, and research shows, that newly minted teachers are ill-prepared to teach the foundational reading skills that are so critical for struggling readers. The result: many teachers do not have the tools necessary to teach all their students to read, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged, are English learners or students with learning disabilities.

We suggest the following:

1. MSDE should gather feedback for a definition of "evidence-based instructional strategies," and that any reading instruction recommendations focus on structured literacy instruction, early screening for reading difficulties and the effective components of reading instruction as defined in IDEA and ESSA.
2. LEAs should hire teacher coaches with Title II funds. Coaches are a best practice and provide real time suggestions to teachers working to change their methods of teaching. This best practice is part of the reading pilot program proposed by the Dyslexia Task Force. Teacher coaches would be a form of job-embedded professional development and would also be highly effective as part of the proposed New Teacher Induction.
3. The Regional Teacher Learning Centers should include a network of "laboratory classrooms" in the K-3 system where student teachers can work with skilled, paid, mentor teachers for fieldwork, and practice teaching students who are at risk for reading and writing difficulties.

4. MSDE should develop training for teachers/professors who teach the four reading courses to teacher candidates. This would help ensure consistency in the content and materials taught across the state.

Parent Engagement

Decoding Dyslexia Maryland suggests the following:

1. Include DDMD and other parent resources on your website;
2. Ensure that parent trainings include SLD/LD/Dyslexia
3. Ensure that LEAs and parent trainings talk about indicators of reading risk and failure so that parents can understand the risks and get help early;
4. Include other parent groups, in addition to the PTA, in stakeholder groups. PTAs typically do not represent parents of students with disabilities.
5. Create more disability awareness in Maryland. Students with disabilities are discriminated against in sports and in the classroom. Awareness would help to reduce this onerous practice and help teachers, particularly at the high school level, understand how to help students with accommodations and sports.
6. DDMD would like to participate in the Maryland Family and Community Engagement (MD FACE) Team.
7. The Superintendent's Family Engagement Council should represent all disability groups and subgroups of parents tested by PARCC and served by IDEA/ESSA.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide stakeholder comments. We feel strongly that when every child learns to read proficiently in the early grades, overall achievement will follow. Please feel free to contact us if you need any clarification.

Sincerely,

Laura Schultz
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CC: Mary Gable, Assistant State Superintendent