

**Testimony from the University of Maine System from Sara Flanagan, University of Maine, Rachel Brown-Chidsey, University of Southern Maine, and Kathryn Will, University of Maine Farmington, Regarding LD 1526, *An Act to Provide Grants to Support Reading Proficiency Programming in Schools* - May 2, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs: Thank you for your continued support of Maine students and their teachers. Our names are Sara Flanagan (University of Maine), Rachel Brown-Chidsey (University of Southern Maine) and Kathryn Will (University of Maine Farmington). We are all teacher education faculty and teach courses in and support Maine teachers' reading instruction.

Together, we recently surveyed 346 Maine elementary general education and special education teachers on their reading instructional and assessment practices, challenges they face teaching reading, what works well teaching reading, and other needs they may have. We also interviewed 45 teachers to better understand these areas. Most of the teachers in our study taught in public schools and were experienced educators having taught for more than 10 years. We are writing to overview the findings of our research in hopes that it will inform your consideration of LD 1526, *An Act to Provide Grants to Support Reading Proficiency Programming in Schools*.

Reading is an essential skill, not just for school, but also for employment, socialization, and day-to-day activities from reading a bus schedule to a menu. Yet, reading is difficult for many students, necessitating the importance of effective instruction. On the [National Assessment of Education Progress](#), 29% of Maine students at the 4th and 8th grade levels performed at or above the proficient level in reading; this suggests that the remaining students may have unmet needs in reading and/or reading difficulties. Organizations like the [National Council for Learning Disabilities](#) and the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#) estimate that 20% of all K-12 students nationally have a learning disability; the majority of these students have difficulties reading and writing, and most are educated in the K-12 general education, inclusive classroom.

In our study, almost 98% of the Maine teachers reported that they taught students who struggle in reading and about 91% teach students with learning disabilities. Essentially, almost all of the teachers teach students with reading needs. When asked what aspects of reading their students experience difficulties with (e.g., fluency, comprehension, phonological awareness, phonics), teachers most commonly listed multiple. This suggests that difficulties reading are not isolated to any one specific area nor that difficulties are only experienced by their students with learning disabilities. Because the reading needs for Maine's students are broad and multifaceted, this supports the importance of effective reading instruction to improve students' reading proficiency.

Teachers reported a variety of reading curriculums, and that they teach and assess students in both the foundational skills of reading (i.e., phonological awareness, phonics and decoding) and higher-level skills like reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. These skills are critical areas of reading that Maine teachers *are* teaching and assessing. However, general education teachers suggested that they may not always collaborate with a special education teacher for reading instruction. This could be problematic as struggling readers receiving special education services may need reading support in both the general education and special education settings; students with disabilities also often receive instruction which includes reading (e.g., reading a worksheet in science, reading a story in English/Language Arts) in the general education setting.

When asked about their level of confidence in teaching reading, 87% rated themselves as very confident or confident on a scale of not confident at all to very confident; specific to teaching reading to students with learning disabilities, only one third said that they were confident or very confident. Additionally, slightly over 76% reported being confident in their abilities to select research-based (i.e., effective) reading instructional strategies to support all students' reading compared to approximately 40% specific to selecting strategies for students with a learning disability. Teachers attributed their confidence level, including lower confidence levels, in teaching reading to several factors including the following: (1) if they had access to an effective curriculum and other materials; (2) if their current curriculum was effective for their students' reading needs; (3) prior receipt of training and coursework on reading; (4) their prior experiences teaching reading; and, (5) their level of knowledge of reading, including instructional strategies. Similarly, teachers shared that these areas also described the barriers they faced regarding reading instruction and assessment, such as not having had a needed training, lack of access to materials, or needing information on topics like best practices in reading. Teachers indicated they would like to have access to more training and resources to teach reading, including to struggling readers. Despite challenges, *teachers were very clear in both the survey and the interviews that they want to support Maine students in reading through effective instructional practices.*

The survey asked teachers what resources they needed to teach and assess reading. They listed a number of areas including access to professional developments and/or other resources (e.g., webinar, websites, coaches, conference, materials) on reading broadly and specific topics like strategies for supporting students with a learning disability and the Science of Reading. Teachers also suggested that time and funding are critical for any reading curriculum or instruction. This also includes, but is not limited to, access to staff such as a reading specialist and having time to collaborate with other teachers to plan reading instruction for their students' reading needs.

Based on our study data and other researchers' publications on effective reading instruction, "good" reading instruction is comprised of several, intertwined components including the following knowledge areas (1) pedagogical (e.g., teaching strategies, methods, instructional activities); (2) effective reading instruction and best practices; (3) how students learn to read and why they may experience difficulties; (4) how to identify reading strengths and needs to develop instruction; (5) how to be a "critical consumer" of information to evaluate the appropriateness of a curriculum or other instructional strategy for their reading instruction; and, (6) student engagement. It is important to note that effective reading instruction is not just accomplished through giving teachers information to increase their knowledge in these areas or providing a new curriculum, but also that there is classroom application along with ongoing support (i.e., teacher receives a reading curriculum, gets training on it, uses it in their classroom, meets with an instructional coach to look at the students' reading tests to determine if they've made growth in reading and areas of need). This was echoed by teachers in this study about the importance of teachers having support in selecting, implementing, and evaluating a reading curriculum.

Our study resulted in the following key takeaways relevant to LD 1526:

1. Teachers may not universally be using or not fully using effective practices for reading in students with or without a learning disability, *but they want to learn more about reading instruction and want to support their students using the most effective instruction possible.*

2. The importance of collaboration between general education teachers, special education teachers, and other instructional staff to best support all students' reading; and,
3. The overall importance of classroom-applicable and easy-to-access information about reading instruction and strategies, struggling readers, the science of reading, and other reading topics at the teacher preparation and in-service levels.

The study supports not only that teachers see reading as a critical instructional area, but also that it is essential that there are initiatives to support reading proficiency in Maine. We are happy to provide support and resources, including more detail about our research, to the Committee and the Maine Department of Education as this legislation and others move forward.

Sincerely,

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