

Testimony of Nicole Flynn
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
LD1562, An Act to Provide Grants to Support Reading Proficiency Programming in
1526 Schools

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Good morning. I am a teacher and a parent of two children who attend Maine schools. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today, about this crucial issue affecting Maine children. We have decades of scientific research on how learning happens in the brain, and what types of reading instruction are effective. We owe it to our children to use these methods to teach them to read and write. I have been a kindergarten teacher, and I'm currently a response-to-intervention teacher for children in grades kindergarten through grade two. Students see me when they are determined to need intervention in reading or math to reach typical grade level standards.

I am here today to advocate for adding language to LD 1526 that requires schools to choose a program that aligns with Structured Literacy standards or the science of reading.

This year, for the first time, I was given the opportunity to use a structured literacy program to teach reading. Structured Literacy includes the foundational building blocks of literacy, decoding, spelling, as well as comprehension and written expression. As with math instruction, children are taught certain skills, practice the skills until they are solidified and then move on to the next. They read books that re-inforce what they have learned. As they gain more understanding of "the code" of English, they can read books with increasing complexity. It's been wonderful to see smiles on the face of a second grader who told me she hated reading at the beginning of the year, and now has realized she can read chapter books and she actually enjoys them!

The results my team and I have seen this year have been exciting. I have worked with children who have been later evaluated to have learning disabilities and moved on to more individualized instruction in special education. I have worked with both native English speakers and English language learners, and every one of these students has shown a great deal of growth this year. In most of my career, I have been taught to use balanced literacy programs. This is usually called readers workshop, and consists of a teacher-led mini-lesson focusing on a reading strategy, and then 20-30 minutes of independent and partner reading as the teacher meets with small groups. Especially in kindergarten, this experience is, at best, most of the children looking at the pictures in

books. I didn't understand the problems with these methods until my second daughter was in first grade. The balanced literacy curriculum masks signs of dyslexia.

Balanced literacy begins in kindergarten with books that have predictable patterns. For instance, "on a sunny day, I swing. Next page, "On a sunny day, I climb." Accompanied by pictures of a child doing these activities. This is an example of a book used for an assessment. The teacher is directed to read an introduction to the student which includes the phrase that will be on every page. Then the child just needs to look at the picture. With this used as a measurement of reading ability, my daughter raised no red flags in kindergarten.

It is a well-known fact that early intervention changes literacy outcomes for kids like my daughter. By first grade, there was some concern, and she started seeing an RTI teacher. By the end of 2nd grade we requested that the school evaluate her for learning disabilities. At the meeting, it was questioned whether one year "behind benchmark" was far enough behind to require an evaluation. The evaluation revealed that she had dyslexia. I include this piece of our story to say that I am an educator, and I happened to be working in RTI when I noticed that my child needed more help, than to be told to, "read more!" Getting an evaluation for my daughter was a challenging process. There are kids in every classroom who have the same disability as Lexi, but have been sliding through each year, and being told to "read more" and to "focus!" We know that for the vast majority of readers, explicit systematic instruction is beneficial. For a smaller percentage, like Lexi, structured literacy is vital.

My daughter was first introduced to structured literacy, during the summer between 4th and 5th grade. We drove her from Brunswick to Cape Elizabeth where she attended a program from 8:00 to 12:00 five days a week for 4 weeks. It was an intensive program with only 5 minute breaks between each hour of instruction. I expected her to complain about it, but what happened was that she'd come home excited to tell me what she had learned and happy. She said, "They know how to teach me the way my brain learns!" There is no reason we can't do this for kids in the public school system. Structured literacy works, and we need to implement these programs as soon as possible.

Thank you,

Nicole Flynn