

Testimony of Kate Kalajainen, Kindergarten Teacher
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
~~LD1562~~; An Act to Provide Grants to Support Reading Proficiency Programming in
Schools

LD1526

May 2, 2023

Good morning, Representative Brennan, Senator Rafferty, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Kate Kalajainen. I am a resident of Brunswick and a kindergarten teacher in a nearby school district. I have 15 years of teaching experience in New York City, abroad, and here in Maine and I have a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education.

I first became interested in the science of Reading several years ago when I took a DOE mandated special education class and had to do a research project about a specific learning disability. I chose dyslexia, and it is that research that led me to the science behind how people learn to read. Learning about the science of reading made me reevaluate and question how I had taught reading over the years. I continued to learn more about the science of reading over the next several years while planning to return to the classroom after moving to Maine and taking some time off. When I was hired the weekend before school started to teach remote kindergarten in the fall of 2020, I got the chance to test my new knowledge. All of the math and literacy curriculum materials (The Teachers College Reading and Writers Project, used by many many schools across Maine and the country) were dropped off to me, but as soon as I opened the first of more than 10 teacher manuals, I knew it wasn't suited to remote teaching. So that year, I took what I had learned about the science of reading and put it into action. I taught the children in a systematic and structured way - focusing on the letters and sounds first, and then the short vowel sounds within the context of CVC words (consonant vowel consonant) and then digraphs and blends. Meanwhile, we also blended the sounds they knew together to read smaller words and then bigger ones in isolation and in decodable books (over screen sharing). Those children, now in 2nd grade, learned to read despite the less than ideal circumstances, and convinced me that structured literacy was the best way to teach reading.

When I was hired to teach Kindergarten in person, I knew I would continue to implement structured literacy in my classroom. Both of my general education in person classes have included children on the Autism spectrum, children with ADHD, children with speech and language disorders, challenges with executive function as well as neurotypical children. It has been such a joy to watch all of them thrive and learn to read. And the pride that those children feel when they can decode a book or passage

we read is particularly rewarding. Parents have reached out to say how impressed they are with their children's growth, particularly in literacy. This year, 12 out of my 16 children scored in the high average or high range on the winter NWEA test. Noone scored in the low range.

Emily Hanford's podcast, Sold a Story has recently brought the way reading is taught into the national spotlight. If you haven't listened yet, I highly recommend it. The short version is that teachers, administrators, parents and teacher prep programs have fallen victim to a popular approach to teaching reading that was actually disproved by science and research years ago. Yet this method persists and is promoted even as many children are failing to learn to read.

According to Edweek, as of July of 2022, 29 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013. The first to do so was Mississippi in 2013. This bill, LD 1562, is the first step in getting Maine on to that list as well. However, it isn't specific enough. We need to be very specific about what kinds of programs will bring about effective change. Claiming to teach "phonics" isn't enough. Schools need to have access to evidence based, research backed, systematic and explicit literacy instruction - these are programs based in the science of how we know people learn to read. There are a number of programs that fall under that description, so districts could still make their own choices.

Here are my suggestions as to how to improve this bill and continue moving forward:

- Change the language in the current bill to require schools to choose programming and accompanying PD that is backed by the Science of reading and is systematic and explicit in its approach;
- Be clear that programs that still adhere to the "3 cueing system" (Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading Collection and Lucy Caulkins The Readers and Writers Project are 2 popular national programs) are not backed by the science of reading and are not eligible for the grant;
- Beginning with the 2024-2025 school year, schools should adopt a program (for Tier 1 classroom instruction as well as Tier 2 intervention) for literacy that is aligned with the science of reading and should no longer use programs that are based on the three-cueing model;
- The DOE should begin work to develop guidelines for teaching the science of reading in teacher preparation programs, perhaps including it in certification requirements; and

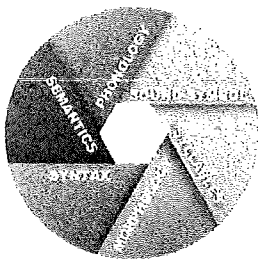
- The DOE should develop and publish an advisory list of science of reading/literacy curricula. These must be research-backed, evidence-based, explicit and include systematic phonics programs.

Thank you for listening today. Please do not hesitate to reach out if I can answer any questions or be of further assistance. This is an area that I feel passionate about and want to help all our children here in Maine reach their potential as readers.

Below I am including some graphics that might be helpful.

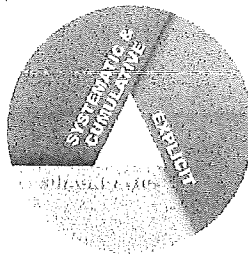
Structured literacy

Explicit teaching of systematic word identification and decoding strategies



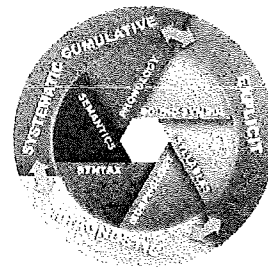
Evidence-based elements

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Evidence-based teaching principles

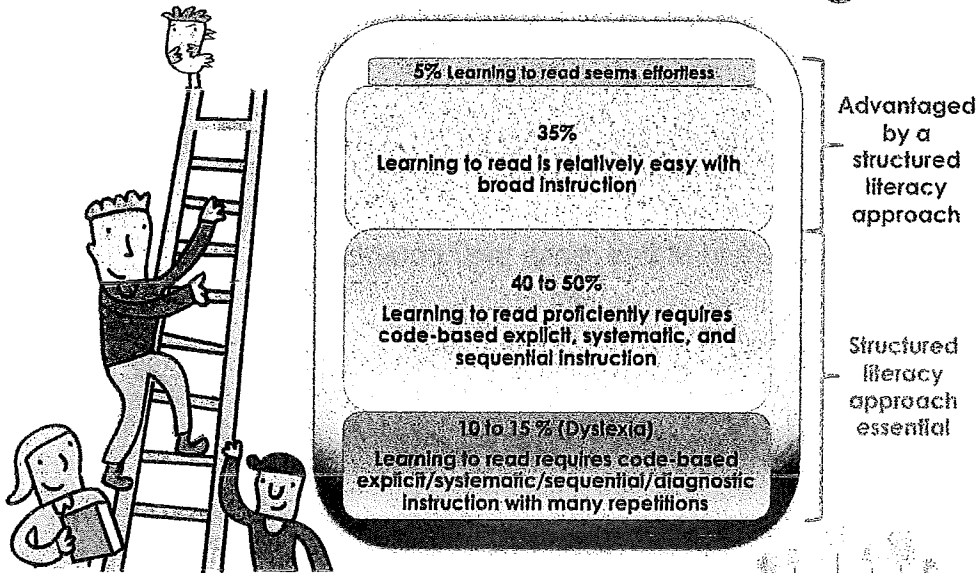
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Effective reading instruction

Source: © 2016 Cowen for International Dyslexia Association
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The Ladder of Reading



© N. Young, 2012 (updated 2017)

Artwork by Dean Stanton

(Lyon, 1998; NRP, 2000; IDA, 2015; Hemenstall, 2016)

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<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>