
House Education Committee Re: Testimony Regarding SB 567

Good morning, Chair Koleszar and Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Eric Hoppstock, and I am the Superintendent of Berrien RESA. As a school psychologist, director of special education, and a member of national special education committees and boards, I have extensive experience with the evaluation and remediation of over 3,000 students with reading and writing difficulties, specifically working with families to understand the nature of the reading difficulty and development of interventions to maximize reading outcomes. Also, having a sister with a profound reading disability, I have had a front row seat to the lifelong impact of not learning to read proficiently.

I commend the Chair and the Education Committee for their passion in taking on the monumental task of improving the literacy outcomes of students in Michigan. Like you, I am not happy with the current reading proficiency rates of students in our state. While I welcome this much needed conversation, I am asking that we slow down for just a moment to get this legislation right.

My concern is that, in a desire to improve clarity and coherence, the current bill proposes changes in identification, instruction, and intervention of dyslexia through increased specificity. The proposed language doubles down on specificity by adding no less than 15 additional requirements that must be addressed by school districts. Rather than clarity and coherence, I fear that chaos and confusion may result, putting further pressure on an already stressed profession.

I feel there are three areas in SB 567 where this confusion will manifest itself: the definition of dyslexia, identification/assessment, and interventions.

Definition: Dyslexia, as defined by the proposed bill, is a specific learning disorder that is neurobiological in origin and characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition. The common perception is that there is a clearly identifiable pattern for all students with dyslexia, but most research refers to dyslexia in more general terms indicating it to be a severe and complex reading problem. A meta-analysis completed by Elliott and Grigorenko indicated that there is no clear, consistent and cohesive definition. They further indicate there is no clear recommendation of an intervention strategy once a diagnosis of dyslexia is given. This would make sense, as the Science of Reading spells out through multiple studies, that reading is a developmental progression which requires multiple cognitive skills developed over time. The definition of dyslexia is further obscured in the bill by adding multiple behavioral elements to the dyslexia definition in grades 4-12 that must be considered and potentially screened in order to intervene.

Identification and Assessment: Screening and diagnostic assessment is currently addressed in 1280f. One would assume with greater specificity in these assessments, there would be more accurate results. However, there have been mixed results in the states that have tried this so far. If the definition of dyslexia refers to a broad set of skills, then identification will have to cover a broad set of skills as well, complicating the screening process. By way of illustration, this would be no different than screening for heart disease which may be the result of numerous causes, only to ask the follow up question, "Which assessment should be used?" This is addressed in the bill by requiring more diagnostic testing which will be labor intensive. Educators are directed to make decisions on assessments that minimize the time taken from instruction - this is contradictory and leaves us in a difficult position. (In fact, I have already received requests for dyslexia tests from non-public schools, which reinforces my earlier point that literacy skill development is being viewed narrowly, and there is a discrete set of skills that can be used to easily identify dyslexia.)

Intervention: The Science of Reading is a body of research which was largely settled in the mid-1990s. This research taught us a great deal about the progression of reading and that reading is not a natural process like learning to speak. Many skills are necessary but insufficient to result in strong, proficient readers. Many studies clearly indicate that one size does not fit all, and we must use student data paired with an in-depth understanding of the development of reading to differentiate our instruction. Without this clear understanding, districts will fall prey to assessment and curriculum companies that will assure districts that their approach is rooted in the Science of Reading. The bill appears to address this by directing the Department of Education to develop guidance documents, but no matter how well developed, at the end of the day they are still just that - guidance.

Research has taught us much about the importance of early intervention in remediation reading difficulties before they have a chance to become problematic in a developing reader. Unfortunately, the bill does not mention pre-K as a key element in addressing reading difficulties. We have a rich history of preschool in Michigan with data indicating that having a preschool experience reduces the need for future interventions and improves educational outcomes. However, prescriptive teaching is prohibited or limited in most preschool curriculums utilized by the state's Great Start Readiness Programs. This is a key element in making Michigan students successful readers and is not considered nor addressed in this bill.

As I said in the beginning, thank you for taking on this issue. I believe Michigan can be a national leader in getting this right, we just need to consider how to make the legislation clear, consistent and coherent. I am committed to being part of that solution and look forward to partnering with you on this important topic.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric Hoppstock, Superintendent
Berrien RESA