

Written Testimony for Senate Bills 567 and 568
June 4, 2024

Thank you. My name is Dr. Stephen Keskes, Ed.D. My role is the Director of Grants and Academic innovation at the Stockbridge Community Schools. I have been working with teachers and districts to implement structured literacy programming over the past 10 years in multiple contexts and have seen first hand its impact on children and adults. Over the past 25 years, I have served as a Middle School and High School English Teacher, Building Administrator, and Central Office Administrator. I am here today to share my experience in solving problems with reading in schools from a District perspective.

When I was the Asst. Superintendent in the Clio Area Schools for 8 years, we implemented several Balanced Literacy approaches in an attempt to improve reading outcomes. We implemented Reading Recovery, Levelled Literacy and other whole word or whole language approaches in an attempt to increase our students' reading abilities. We made some gains with some students, however we were not successful with many students. I said to my middle school Title I teacher, we must do something different. This is not working. We landed on Orton Gillingham training, because it was vastly different from what we had been doing for years in the district. After that training she was on fire with excitement about the new information and its possibilities. She implemented this strategy with children in a Title I setting and these children made gains that they hadn't made in a very long time. Some of these students had RR when they were in 1st grade, which affirms the research surrounding Reading Recovery's short term success. We then implemented the training at our elementary schools as part of our MTSS system. Children made gains again and teachers were curious as to what we were doing differently. We then expanded training to teaching staff at the elementary level. Training was optional for staff, but when teachers saw initial results, more teachers wanted training, too. Training gave teachers a feeling of empowerment and efficacy. Our results included a decrease in spec. ed. number and improvements in student reading abilities. Funding came from Children's Choice initiative and 31a at risk money.

In my last district as Asst. Supt. of H.R., I saw the district shifting to structured literacy (training with 35d money O-G), LETRS training. Last year was the first year of implementation and they were seeing improvements. Theirs is not my story to tell, but they have recently presented their results to Ingham County Coaches and what was shared was more than impressive.

Currently, as the new Director of Grants and Academic Innovation in Stockbridge, we've trained several teachers in O-G and LETRS. The challenge has been they want another colleague also doing it so they could do peer coaching. Thank God for 35j funds. Our intent next year is to train teachers district wide PK-5; implement Orton-Gillingham through the Institute for Multisensory Education and learn how to best scope and sequence in our learning community and selectively abandon some of our large textbook company reading resources that don't align with our new Science of Reading best practices. We will fine tune the following year and begin the new curriculum adoption process using our structured literacy approach as the backbone of how we approach teaching children how to read.

The reason I support these bills is based upon my experience in the field in multiple contexts. Research tells us that 5-19% of our population has dyslexia. As a District administrator I cannot tell you which children or how many have these tendencies because diagnosis takes a psychologist or a medical professional. Once diagnosed, there isn't a medical cure or treatment. The treatment is a structured literacy approach to learning how to read. Most of the communities I've served have large numbers of free and reduced lunch. My current district doesn't have a Doctor's office for over 14 miles in any direction. The ability to even screen for dyslexia at the school level is vitally important. We need to be using screening assessments that are valid and reliable, so we find kids early that need intervention and to make sure our curricular materials support what the science teaches us works.

In my current district, we are shifting to valid and reliable Screening assessments that take less instructional time and give us more relevant data to better understand the requisite reading skill components that our students either have or don't have. It is imperative that we concentrate our teachers' and our students' time on activities that improve their outcomes and not on testing for the sake of testing.

One of the biggest takeaways is seeing teachers that were never taught what scientific research has learned about how the brain learns to read, but once teachers have this training and instructional methods to make it come alive, teacher efficacy increases and it is such an amazing morale booster! Every teacher I know comes to work every day wanting to make a difference for their students. Empowering them with the tools to ensure children are successful readers has strengthened their resolve and improved student outcomes. It even improved retention for a couple staff members who were teetering on retirement, because they were reenergized.

Thank you for your time and support of Michigan teachers and children.