



Good morning, Representatives, and thank you for allowing me to testify in favor of Senate Bills 567 and 568. My name is Ben Locke, and I'm the Michigan Executive Director of Teach Plus, an education nonprofit that seeks to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. I'm also a former middle school and high school teacher who cringes at the memory of how I used to teach reading skills to students.

Currently, I work with teachers who have been advocating for these bills as they have worked their way through the legislative process. Those teachers have put in countless hours analyzing the bills, reaching out to lawmakers such as yourselves, suggesting improvements, writing op-eds, persuading other stakeholders, and giving public testimony before the Senate Education Committee.

The teachers I work with see why these bills are so desperately needed to help their struggling readers. Shannon, a third grade Spanish Immersion teacher, felt heartbroken for her student Jared, who was still reading at a kindergarten level when he reached her third grade class. It wasn't until Shannon received LETRS training- the type of training more teachers would receive through these bills- that she understood how a child learns to read. This training came too late for her to help Jared.

Alyssa, an elementary special education teacher I work with, told me about her student Jon, who sees the word 'bat,' sounds out 'b/ /a/ /t/' and says 'dig.' Jon's brain is unable to connect these sounds, but without sufficient screeners or evidence-based supports in place, Jon wasn't getting individualized instruction targeted at his specific needs.

Or take Carrie, a 4th grade teacher who was desperate to help her student Ally. Carrie felt like Mary Poppins, elbow deep in her carpet bag, pulling out every trick, every game, every book that she could think of to help Ally learn to read. Carrie's search for the right instructional methods felt so desperate because, without proper support and training, it was unclear to her which methods were most effective. Luckily, SB567 makes clear which instructional methods are appropriate within the narrow context of teaching struggling readers to decode, and which instructional methods are not appropriate. Section 24 of the bill provides clarity to teachers like Carrie, so that she doesn't have to scramble around in her bag of tricks, looking for the best instructional methods to help Ally learn to decode.

Beyond the individual experiences of these three teachers from different parts of the state, data show why we must pass these bills. Michigan ranks seventh-worst in the nation for fourth grade reading scores. Michigan's reading scores are the lowest they've been in 30 years. According to the NCTQ report on "Teacher Prep Review," Michigan's teacher preparation programs rank below the national average for the number of components its reading programs adequately address.



I'm concerned that if we fail to pass these bills, students like Jared, Jon, and Ally won't get the help they need. I'm concerned that if we water down the language in these bills, clear guidance will become mere suggestions, which provide no incentive for the system to change. Why change if you don't have to? I'm concerned that if we wait until all schools are fully staffed to screen students for dyslexia and provide them with evidence-based supports, thousands of students will continue to slip through the cracks. But right now, my hope outweighs my concern. I'm hopeful that you will vote "yes" on these bills, so that we can change the educational trajectory of students like Jared, Jon, and Ally for the better. Thank you.

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THE 'GANDER

Opinion: Every child should be able to read

By Alyssa Henneman

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Imagine yourself as a third grader. You're 8 years old. You look at a word and try to sound it out. Then you say something completely different. This is dyslexia.

Take Jon, one of my third grade students, who is unable to read simple, two-three letter words. When he sees the word 'bat,' he sounds out '/b/ /a/ /t/' and says 'dig.' Jon's brain is unable to connect these sounds. As a school, we have used every intervention available to us, including differentiated reading instruction, and Phonics for Reading to name just two. We even had Jon evaluated for special education services. In the meantime, Jon is still not reading, even though I try to carve out time every day to work with him. At 8 years old, he's losing previous learning time.

I know that Jon needs individualized instruction. The problem is that many teachers in Michigan are not trained to work with students like Jon who have dyslexia. What's more, teachers like me aren't required to learn how to teach reading until their masters program or within five years of starting teaching. Even then, the reading course I took did not cover the science of reading, a way to teach students how to read using a multisensory approach that Jon needs.

Jon's situation is made more complicated by the fact that in Michigan, dyslexia is not an area of eligibility for special education services nor can the special education evaluation we currently have in place diagnose dyslexia. A student needs to demonstrate a pattern of strengths and weaknesses on both the cognitive and achievement testing that add up to a lack of learning progress. Dyslexia's markers are different and Jon's scores don't follow a predictable pattern of strengths and weaknesses. His cognitive scores are not low enough to count as cognitive impairment. Jon is what I like to call a bubble kid, in between a learning disability and a cognitive impairment.

What Jon and up to **64,000 children** between kindergarten and 3rd grade alone need are robust screeners that can identify this specific learning disability early enough to make their learning trajectory a success. Senate Bill 567, sponsored by State Senator Jeff Irwin, would do just that. The bill would require screening of K-3 grade students beginning in the 2025-26 school year. A dyslexia screener, conducted three times a year, is a test that helps to determine if a student's current skill level shows them to be at risk of reading difficulties, such as dyslexia. These screeners would help teachers like me alter their instruction to cater to our students' individual needs.

While screening students is a great start, it is not enough. Senate Bill 567 would also require that teachers are trained to use the screeners and that they implement interventions to teach students with dyslexia to read. These interventions would include science of reading strategies such as LETRS. LETRS is currently available to select Michigan teachers as an optional training.

The next important ingredient for success are early literacy coaches, who work with local districts like mine on a need basis. Because the coaches are only able to work a certain number of hours in each district, their support is not readily available. Their duties vary from district to district, from organizing classroom libraries and meeting with teachers to administering assessments and distributing new curriculum to teachers. If this legislation were to pass, early literacy coaches would be required to receive training on how to coach teachers through interventions for students with dyslexia. That will go a long way towards helping students like Jon.

Every child should be able to read by the time they are in 3rd grade. By instituting screeners and requiring teachers to have training in interventions for dyslexia, Jon would be able to receive the support he deserves.

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