

SEEK Testimony to the Committee on Education

Re: HB-6620

*An Act Concerning the **Right to Read** and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Schools*

March 17, 2021

Chairman McCrory, Chairman Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, Members of the Committee,

Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK) is a statewide organization of parents, providers, attorneys and advocates working for high quality education and civil rights for students with disabilities. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today.

SEEK agrees that there is an urgent need for legislation and oversight to ensure our students learn to read. It is perhaps the most important thing that schools teach, as reading is essential to access any level of education or employment. *Research indicates that approximately 95% of all children are capable of reading on grade level.* In stark contrast, the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) showed that *only 40% of Connecticut's fourth graders were reading on grade level.* Obviously, our teachers and reading specialists are not deliberately failing to teach students; for decades, teacher preparation programs have failed to provide them with the necessary program of study and supervised practicum to be successful.¹ And to date, Connecticut has failed to provide effective leadership to districts to ensure that proven methods of reading instruction and assessment are utilized in our schools.

HB-6620 attempts to remedy this problem, and although we generally support the bill's intentions, we have a number of concerns:

1. The bill repeatedly emphasizes that the goal for students is reading proficiency by the end of Grade 5, increasing this from Grade 3. However, research indicates that students need to be proficient by the end of Grade 3. Increasing the "goal line" to encompass Grade 5 sends a dangerous message to school districts about when a child should reach proficiency. However, SEEK agrees that school districts should continue to assess basic reading skills through Grade 5 and to provide remedial supports as needed, regardless of the child's grade.
2. Much of the support in the bill is limited to Alliance districts. It needs to be expanded to include all school districts. It is clear that the "opportunity gap" exists even within non-Alliance districts.
3. Regarding Lines 7-10, which require school districts to notify the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success ("the Center") which reading curriculum model or program they are using, this needs to occur annually, not every two years. In addition, districts should be required to provide annual data to the Center indicating what percentage of students in each grade are performing

¹ HB-6517 (An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force to Analyze the Implementation of Laws Governing Dyslexia Instruction and Training) seeks to remedy this, and we urge your support.

below proficiency on the Center-approved reading assessments (apart from SBAC data which does not assess early reading skills). Such data must be publicly available through the state's online reporting site, EdSight.

4. Regarding Lines 27-36 that state the Center shall approve at least five reading curriculum models or programs, we caution against the common assumption that a "good" reading curriculum is sufficient to reasonably ensure adequate student achievement. A program on its own is unlikely to ensure success; teacher training in structured literacy is essential. For example, many districts are now using Wilson Foundations as part of Tier 1 instruction, which would meet the standards described in this paragraph. However, teachers often have received only a few days of training in the program, if that; and many teachers combine Foundations with Readers Workshop, which is a reading program that is not only ineffective but is damaging to poor readers and those with dyslexia. If all elementary school teachers and reading specialists had participated in a comprehensive program of study and supervised practicum in structured literacy (which can take two years or longer), this would not happen.
5. In addition to No. 4, the bill needs to reflect that students with IEPs must have instruction that is individualized to their needs, regardless of the district's preferred reading program or method. Students with dyslexia, for example, require instruction that is diagnostic and prescriptive--in addition to being "research-based"--and that must be provided by instructors who have had a comprehensive program of study and supervised practicum in structured literacy.
6. Regarding the Center's selection of reading programs/methods, the Center must publish online what standards they are using to recommend these programs/methods.
7. SEEK strongly supports Lines 133-151, which state that the Center shall compile a list of approved reading assessments for students in Grades K-5 that would assess progress in each component of reading, in line with reading research, and that would serve as screening for dyslexia.
8. In addition, we would add to this that districts must provide parents with written notification of their child's progress on approved reading assessments, clearly stating whether the child is at or below grade-level proficiency.
9. We would also add that districts must refer students who are identified as being at risk for dyslexia to a Planning and Placement Team meeting (PPT) to consider comprehensive evaluation and the need for special instruction. Although current law requires referral to a PPT when a student's academic performance is even "marginal," districts routinely fail to do this, resulting in thousands of students falling through the cracks in elementary school and beyond, not receiving

the individualized instruction that they require. Students with dyslexia who are identified as needing special education in kindergarten and first grade can often be fully remediated with the right instruction. The outcomes grow worse as students get older.

10. The bill needs to explicitly state that students shall not be required to go through all “tiers” of a district’s SRBI (Scientific Research Based Intervention) process prior to being referred to a PPT or identified for special education.

11. Lines 166 through 179 provide a definition of “scientifically-based reading research and instruction.” This definition needs to be revised to exclude research that is not peer-reviewed (e.g., not published in a peer-reviewed journal). Many publishers of reading programs mislead consumers by claiming their programs are “research-based” when the only studies supporting the program have been conducted by the creator of the reading program--and that research is typically unpublished and has not passed the peer review process. SEEK would agree with the definition that was found in the No Child Left Behind Act, which stated:

The term 'scientifically based reading research' means research that-

(A) applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties;

and

(B) includes research that-

(i) employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;

(ii) involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;

(iii) relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and

(iv) has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

12. Regarding lines 180-193, it is unclear why the Commissioner of Education in consultation with the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success will need to (re)create annually an intensive reading instruction program. If we have a plan that is effective, it is unlikely that it will need to be reinvented every year. Instead, the plans and data should be reviewed annually.

13. Line 224 references “external literacy coaches” being available. Since anyone can refer to themselves as a literacy coach, the qualifications need to be specified. E.g., the literacy coach needs to have completed a comprehensive program of study and supervised practicum in structured literacy, needs to have expertise in the identification and instruction of students with

dyslexia, and needs to have extensive experience and a proven track record of success in remediating all components of reading for students in Grades K-3.

14. Lines 274 to 277 indicate that elementary principals in Alliance districts will notify parents of children who have been identified as being below proficiency in reading. This requirement must be extended to include all elementary schools, regardless of whether or not they are in Alliance districts.
15. Lines 363 through 369 indicate that a reading readiness program needs to be established “within available appropriations.” The appropriations must be made available.
16. Lines 376 through 380 reference teachers and administrators receiving professional development in the science of reading, pursuant to Section 10-148b. It is unfortunate that Section 10-148b does not specify the length or content of this professional development, nor the qualifications of the individuals providing it. The data on professional development for teachers needs to at least reflect the requirements of 10-145d, reflecting a program of study and supervised practicum in structured literacy.
17. Lines 441 and 442 indicate that the Center will publicly report biennially the reading curriculum model/program being implemented in each district. This needs to be reported annually, along with the percentage of students in K-5 reading at/below grade level in each district, as measured by Center-approved assessments.
18. Regarding Lines 465-481 establishing a Reading Leadership Implementation Council, the bill fails to include any members who represent parents of children with disabilities, nor any parent representatives at all. *We believe that any such council needs to include members who are strong representatives of parents of children of disabilities.*
19. Regarding Lines 488 through 497, similar to what we wrote in No. 13, above, the qualifications of the “reading coaches” must be clearly defined.

SEEK appreciates your attention and remains willing to be of assistance in revising this legislation.

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