

March 16, 2021

Testimony in opposition to:

Raised Bill No. 6620 - *An Act Concerning the Right to Read and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Education*

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Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, and Honorable Members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns about Raised Bill No. 6620 - *An Act Concerning the Right to Read and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Education*.

I am an education consultant and a former elementary school teacher with authorizations in remedial reading and bilingual instruction. Though I work for the State Education Resource Center (SERC) which is named in this bill, the thoughts and opinions I express are my own. I am not acting as a representative of SERC. I am providing testimony because of my commitment to students, racial equity and social justice, and because of my belief in the power of reading and writing to change lives.

I strongly oppose the sections of this bill related to the establishment of a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success and its responsibilities. I understand the purpose of this bill is to provide effective reading instruction to students as a means of closing the opportunity gap; however, establishing a center to identify and approve reading curriculum models and programs for all school districts will reduce the number of options teachers have to meet the needs of all students.

Connecticut students will not benefit from a Center that identifies and approves reading curriculum models and programs.

At face value, the prescribed approach in this bill is not much different from what is already in place – the five components of reading, and evidence-based and scientifically-based models – but a closer look at the specific language of the bill reveals lowered expectations for students and a limited interpretation of the terms “evidenced-based,” “scientifically-based,” and “research-based.”

These lines from Raised Bill No. 6620 indicate that expectations for students are lowered or that the terms “evidenced-based,” “scientifically-based,” and “research-based” are not drawn from a wide scope of research.

- Line 4 - expansion of the bill to extend to grade five. Without evidence that students in grades four and five need to be taught differently, expansion to these grade levels suggests lowered expectations for additional students.
- Line 177 - change in language: “vocabulary” to “vocabulary development.” “Development” suggests that students are working toward attaining vocabulary, rather than actually increasing their vocabulary. This suggests lowered expectations for students.
- Line 178 - change in language: “text comprehension” to “reading fluency, including oral skills and reading comprehension.” This [brief](#) from the International Literacy Association explains the relationship between fluency and comprehension - “Another metaphor to describe the role of fluency is that of a doorway that leads to comprehension and increased motivation.” Text comprehension involves deep application of higher order thinking skills; reading comprehension as a part of fluency (prosody) does not. This is an example of lowered expectations for students.

- Lines 245, 377, 449 - “**the** science of teaching reading.”[emphasis added] There is not just one science of teaching reading. Here are some resources: [Bringing the Actual Science of Reading to Policy and Practice – University of Michigan](#); [Conflict or Conversation? Media Portrayals of the Science of Reading](#).
- Lines 450, 478 - “**the** intensive reading instruction program.”[emphasis added] To provide only one intensive reading instruction program suggests that a broad range of research was not considered.

Requiring districts to choose from an approved list of programs will hurt many students because it reduces the options to meet students’ specific challenges and build on their specific strengths.

One of the goals of this bill is to close the opportunity gaps for students of color and English learners. There is nothing specific in this bill, beyond the mention of culturally relevant curricula, that would address the needs of these students. Black and Brown students and English learners do not necessarily need a different curriculum model, they need intentional, focused, and specific enhancements to the model in current use. These enhancements must be “historically responsive” (Muhammad, 2020) and take into account students’ lived experiences. These students need more, not less, and establishing a center to identify and approve instructional programs would provide less. “More” could be provided through a focus on higher order thinking skills, motivation, choice, and engagement. “More” could be provided through teacher training to reduce the impacts of implicit bias, low expectations, and stereotype threat. The lowered expectations and narrow interpretation of reading research in the bill provide less, not more.

This bill is an example of interest convergence where “the interests of blacks in achieving racial equity will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites.” (Bell, 1980) However, in this instance, there is little chance of our Black and Brown students truly achieving equity in the area of reading without a clearly defined and deliberate approach.

I want to acknowledge that my employer, SERC, would benefit from this bill should it pass. I feel strongly that the aspects of this bill related to reading are detrimental to students, and in my opinion, this outweighs any benefit that my employer or I might receive.

This bill is the “All Lives Matter” version of reading instruction. The approach is race-neutral and colorblind. Establishing a Center and limiting the options for teaching reading will not improve outcomes for the students who need it the most.

Thank you for your consideration.