



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
Early Literacy and SB 801**

**Presented to the  
Senate Education Committee  
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**By  
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Good morning, Chairman Argall, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Rachael West and I am the Treasurer of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). More importantly for today's purposes, prior to being elected by my peers as PSEA Treasurer, I was a middle and high school math teacher for 24 years, mostly in the Red Lion Area School District in York County. Additionally, I received my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Wilkes University. Thank you for inviting PSEA to testify this morning on early literacy and Senate Bill 801. I'm pleased to be here and have the opportunity to share feedback on SB 801.

Reading is ***the*** fundamental skill that young learners must master to be successful throughout their educational career. ***While students must learn to read in grades K-3, we know that beginning in grade 4, or earlier, students are reading to learn.*** If a child doesn't learn to read, a domino effect of challenges likely follows them throughout their education, and likely their life, until they master the skill. Every educator wants every student to achieve and be prepared to engage civically in an informed and thoughtful way. Literacy is foundational to that goal.

Public education has a responsibility to respond to research and data on how students learn. The research around the science of reading is compelling and should motivate all of us – educators, policymakers, and parents – into action. While I can't speak to the curriculum decisions of every public school in Pennsylvania, I can tell you that teachers desperately care about their students and their futures. And as parent, I can recall the importance of phonics particularly when my two children were learning to read.

Since Senate Bill 801 was introduced this year, PSEA has been contacted by its own members – elementary school teachers, reading specialists, librarians, and some in their role as parents – on the importance of these bills. ***Our members want to see effective reading instruction in grades K-3. I'm here today to elevate their voices, share concerns regarding the structure of proposals, and continue our commitment to engage with the bill sponsors.***

***Some might wonder: Why isn't everyone utilizing the science of reading already? Why aren't all schools using an evidence-based reading instruction curriculum?*** To answer that, one must realize that the science of reading hasn't necessarily been part of teacher preparation programs or professional development offered by schools. Additionally, educators are often discouraged from making dramatic changes to curriculum due to cost. School curriculum is a big business, generating hundreds of millions of dollars a year for curriculum development companies and publishers internationally. Purchasing curriculum is expensive and once a transition is made, all instructional materials and assessments must be aligned to that curriculum. It's not a simple process, nor is it cheap one.

In a balanced literacy approach, teachers were ***respected*** as experts in their craft. There was community among educator colleagues, and people believed that by creating a culture of reading in classrooms, we were giving students the best of both worlds – teacher-led instruction AND independent learning. As a teacher, I know nothing could make an educator feel worse than

being told that what they have been doing for decades is not only wrong, but also ineffective for hundreds of kids. For whatever reason, people didn't know about the research around the science of reading. But now that we know, we must do better.

While there are many PSEA members who are supportive of Senate Bill 801, we also have many members who are wary of legislative efforts that are or give the appearance of an initiative designed to push particular programs, new staffing requirements, or curriculum at the behest of third-party corporations via their contract lobbyists. This is a common phenomenon that we often see in relation to school health legislation.

***PSEA questions whether the General Assembly should be directing school entities to adopt only PDE-approved curriculum as proposed on page 4, lines 19-20, of SB 801.*** This concept would establish a precedent that would de-emphasize local oversight over curriculum. Pennsylvania was one of the first states to adopt academic standards in the late 1990s. The adoption of curriculum was delegated to school entities, with public approval from school boards, to ensure that each school entity had curriculum that aligned with academic standards, but that also suited the needs of their community. ***PSEA's members are not ready to establish a precedent whereby decisions on curriculum are handed over to PDE.*** This provision currently causes PSEA to oppose the bill; however, we believe there is a different way to structure the curriculum provision of SB 801, one that ensures the bill contains a stronger definition of “evidence-based reading instruction,” creates a statewide Reading Leadership Council to advise PDE on the list of curricula that meet the aforementioned definition, and requires school entities to adopt an “evidence-based curriculum,” but does not necessarily go as far as to require that curriculum be selected from the list. Such an approach would ensure that educators are part of the process to identify curriculum and preserve school entities' long-standing authority to adopt curriculum. Additionally, we think this would help those public school entities that put teachers in charge of choosing curriculum. Having a list of curricula that was vetted by peers on the proposed Council will encourage trust. It will also save teachers time, and ensure they are less susceptible to a glossy sales pitch.

Another issue that PSEA's members identified in their discussions on Senate Bill 801 was transition costs for school entities to comply with the proposed law, namely for training, as well as current and prospective curriculum contracts. Post-secondary institutions are currently updating teacher preparation programs to comply with the Ch. 49 regulations around structured literacy.<sup>1</sup> This means future teachers will be provided the foundation for the science of reading in college. These same regulations require public school entities to update their professional development plans to explain how schools will provide professional development in structured

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<sup>1</sup> The term “structured literacy” is defined under 22 Pa Code § Ch. 49.1 as, systematic, explicit instruction that provides a strong core of foundational skills in the language systems of English, integrates listening, speaking, reading, spelling, and writing and emphasizes the structure of language across the speech sound system (phonology), the writing system (orthography), the structure of sentences (syntax), the meaningful parts of words (morphology), the relationships among words (semantics), and the organization of spoken and written discourse.

literacy to those educators holding instructional certificates in Early Childhood, Elementary/Middle, Special Education PK—12, English as a Second Language, and Reading Specialist. While Senate Bill 801 aligns with 22 Pa Code § Ch. 49, we don't know how many teachers will require professional development in effective reading instruction versus how many have already been trained. PSEA appreciates that the data collection and reporting elements in SB 801 aim to provide the Commonwealth with a clearer picture of training needs, but ultimately Pennsylvania will need to make some initial investments without exact numbers on how many educators will need training. The same is likely true related to transition costs for curriculum contracts. Public school entities enter multi-year contracts with companies for the use of curriculum. Public schools are not on a standard schedule for when this occurs. Therefore, school entities are likely to be in different phases of their existing contracts and will be financially responsible for these contracts, as well as for any new curriculum costs associated with Senate Bill 801.

Pennsylvania would not be unique in relation to these cost concerns. Other states that have prioritized the science of reading recognized the need for financial support and made up-front and lasting state investments in early literacy. Florida invested \$79 million in year one of its program -- \$36 million for professional development alone. Today, Florida invests \$170 million in its reading initiative. Ohio's most recent state budget committed \$160 million to early literacy with a corresponding commitment to the science of reading. Of that allocation, \$43 million was for professional development and \$64 million was to provide schools with high-quality early literacy instructional materials that are consistent with the science of reading. PSEA strongly urges the Committee to include a funding allocation in the bill. We believe this can be part of budget negotiations for FY 24-25.

***Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't say that teachers will need support in making this transition.*** For many, this could be a fundamental change in how they have provided reading instruction for decades. Support needs to come in the form of encouraging school administrators, ongoing professional development, and reading specialists/coaches in schools. The number of Instructional I certificates for reading specialists has dropped by 70 percent since 2010 (see graph on page 4).

Early literacy is yet another example of why Pennsylvania needs to invest in comprehensive and statewide strategies to address the educator shortage. Teachers are overwhelmed, and for some, this bill will exacerbate their feelings of dissatisfaction. They need to know that you see them and that you're planning to establish programs that will ensure students have access to reading specialists/coaches as their schools undertake the transition. Teachers need to feel a community of support and respect from policymakers, colleagues, and parents. I know that's not something you can legislate, but it is something you can help message.

PSEA has other language recommendations for SB 801, which we have been working on for three months in collaboration with Senate and House Education staff as well as proponents of the bill. We are committed to working with the bill's prime sponsors to refine language, ensure PDE

has limited authority over school entity curriculum, and provide support to public schools as they undertake this early literacy transformation. It is our hope that PSEA can support this bill when it is considered. Our government relations staff appreciates the ability to collaborate and work through those issues. And once again, PSEA is grateful for the opportunity to testify this morning. Thank you for your consideration of our comments. I will be happy to answer any questions.

