

Prepared Testimony of Wendy S Farone, PhD  
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Before the General Assembly of Pennsylvania  
Hearing on: "Senate Bill No. 801/Session of 2023"

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Senators and other members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to submit testimony to this body on Senate Bill 801 about evidence-based reading instruction. Since the publication of the National Reading Panel Report in the year 2000, and prior, the research has been in consensus that there are five essential components of reading instruction. I am in support of Bill 801 as a long overdue step toward building opportunities for excellent literacy instruction for all students within the State of Pennsylvania.

My name is Dr. Wendy Farone and I am from Pittsburgh. I have recently retired after 30 years in literacy education. I served for 12 years in elementary education as a classroom teacher and Title 1 reading specialist. For 18 years before my recent retirement, I was an educational consultant with the PA Training & Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) as the Western PA Regional lead in Literacy. I also served for 10 years as a private trainer nationwide in the neurological, evidence-based approach to teaching reading, spelling, and writing and have trained thousands of educators in the science of reading.

My focus within this testimony is on the need for specific professional development for teachers, principals, reading specialists, speech therapists, and special educators. In other words, for anyone who may be responsible for teaching literacy skills to students. Professional development, I believe, is the foundation upon which all children can be successful. We can teach nearly ALL children to read if all teachers understand explicit, direct, systematic instruction in the teaching of reading and spelling which includes: phonological awareness (sounds), decoding (reading), encoding (spelling), writing (sentence level and composition), and the building of vocabulary knowledge through comprehension strategies and a lot of miles on the page.

My passion for professional development starts with a personal story. I went to 3 Pennsylvania universities to obtain my degrees all focusing on education in literacy and teaching reading. I graduated with honors yet was not confident in how to teach reading without a published teacher's book before me. If a child struggled to acquire reading skills...I was lost and referred them to special education. In my frustration over not serving struggling readers well, I thought that maybe the secret to teaching reading was at the Doctorate level so I received a PhD. I still was not able to teach children to read, spell, and write with any confidence.

After years of training in the foundational skills of teaching reading, engaging in evidence-based research, and continuous review of the research of others, I gained confidence. I

am not bragging when I say, “I can teach a child to read on the back of a napkin.” That is how well-versed I am in the teaching of reading as were my colleagues at PaTTAN. We trained the teachers of Pennsylvania on the skills necessary within the system of orthography, for example. Orthography focuses on the spelling system. Spelling is not as crazy as some would believe. What is crazy is that we expect our teachers to understand and teach the spelling system to students without much training in it. For example: Why is there an ‘e’ at the end of words like cheese, please, and mouse? In English orthography, a single ‘s’ at the end of a word means ‘more than one’ (plural) or ‘it is happening right now. Cheese without the ‘e’ marker would mean ‘more than one chee.’ In my experience, many would struggle to explain that spelling to a student.

The programming that is offered within Bill 801 focuses on alignment with **evidence-based** teaching materials. I would offer that most of the top literacy texts offered by vendors say they are in alignment with the **science of reading**. They are “aligned with” but are not usually evidence-based. The difference between these two considerations is that those that are “aligned with” include lessons on the 5 essential components of reading instruction. Those considered “**evidence-based**” are researched on their efficacy and have validity and reliability. The terms are often used interchangeably and are buzzwords used for marketing but these terms are not interchangeable.

For edification and clarity, **evidence-based programs** are often used for intervention. An appropriate research methodology will have been followed using an experimental or quasi-experimental research design and the results will show that the intervention meets the claim and intention of the intervention. This is also used with instructional strategies relating to motivation, engagement, classroom management strategies, and other classroom and instructional needs. The reason major reading programs (e. g. Houghton-Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, Pearson, MacMillan) for general reading programs do not use ‘evidence-based’ protocols is that it would be cost prohibitive. Following the **science of reading**, the five essential components of reading, as their framework, will work for approximately 80% of students. Their “research” is usually based on case studies of populations within a school district implementation. This is common practice.

Intervention programs are different in that they specify one of the five essential components, build strong lessons, engagement strategies, and assessments, and focus intentionally using strong research methods. Using these methods, they can pinpoint the significance or lack thereof of the intervention itself. This difference is critically important as using a general program is appropriate generally, while skill-based interventions are those programs that pinpoint a student’s specific skill need until they reach the expected benchmark and/or mastery. This is how we keep children from slipping through the cracks.

Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of many books including “Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many

Can't, and What Can Be Done About It<sup>1</sup> states, for example, that phonics is “buried” in many commercial reading programs. Teachers may be able to compensate for that if they are highly skilled in the phonics scope and sequence...or they may not. My concern is that many may not have enough understanding of the skills that make up sequential and systematic phonics instruction and, in this case, they may fail a student right along with the lack of programming.

When teachers become dependent upon a reading series to teach children, they are subjected to teaching the middle-of-the-pack student who acquires the skills with daily instruction and all is well. Many students need a more focused approach. As one who was dependent on a reading series, due to my lack of skill-based coursework in college, I yearned for answers and became trained as an Orton-Gillingham Certified Tutor. This type of programming is utilized for students with dyslexia or reading difficulties. This program is not a panacea, no program is, but at least now I understood reading and spelling skills and how to teach them. I should have learned these skills before ever becoming an elementary classroom teacher.

The best chance a student has to learn to read regardless of whether a parent reads them bedtime stories; or helps them with their reading homework and spelling, are highly skilled educators that spot a student's needs inside their spelling and writing. One who is confident in their teaching of reading, spelling, and writing because they, themselves, have a strong command of how all of that works. They can assess for skill deficits and progress monitor to determine if the intervention strategies they are using are making a difference in skill acquisition and what to do if the student is not progressing.

As per the APMReport's recent article, “*How legislation on reading instruction is changing across the country,*”<sup>2</sup> we are seeing a decline in support for programs that have less than successful outcomes for students such as Reading Recovery and Units of Study for Teaching Reading (Calkins). These programs have remained in use for far too long due to some political undertones and the lack of movement from universities and school districts. Yet, finally, thanks to Emily Hanford,<sup>3</sup> and vocal researchers and practitioners, we are beginning to see change.

One need only receive a call from a despondent mother who is crying stating, “They want to put my child in special classes, he hates to read, and homework is a family nightmare. We are falling apart. Can you help us?” This was my experience over and over again. One 5-minute

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<sup>1</sup> Mark S. Seidenberg. *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It*. New York: Basic Books (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Peak, “How Legislation on Reading Instruction is Changing Across the County,” APMReports, Nov. 17, 2022. <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2022/11/17/reading-instruction-legislation-state-map>.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Hanford Resources: Rethinking Teacher Preparation August 27, 2015, Teaching Teachers August 27, 2015; Hard Words: Why Aren't Kids Being Taught to Read? <https://www.readws.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/hard-words-print.pdf>, At a Loss for Words: How a Flawed Idea is Teaching Millions of Kids to be Poor Readers, <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>.

assessment on phonology and phonics revealed that this student did not realize that symbols/spelling patterns represent one of 44 sounds in the English language. We connect the sounds in the spoken word, /d/ /o/ /g/ to the spellings d-o-g and we can replicate the sounds in print. He had been guessing the words based on pictures and memorizing spelling lists. These are behaviors repeatedly shown among poor readers. Some programs actually tell students to guess! During a quick lesson, this young student appeared to be angry. He said, “Why didn’t anyone ever teach me this before, it makes so much sense!!” The alphabetic code was cracked wide open and he remains a very successful student as a result.

This child was about to be placed in special education classes for instruction in reading...the teacher had never been trained to understand these essential components to help this student nor to recognize a skill deficit. This student could have spent his educational life feeling as if he was a failure in learning. Many parents spend thousands of dollars in tutors, counseling, and psychological assessments to find a reason for the student's failure to learn to read...when all along, a well-informed, knowledgeable, and skilled teacher within a supportive school environment could have lessened this burden by pinpointing skill needs and intervening. There is no perfection here. Teachers are like doctors in diagnosing what may be the issue, then digging deeper and deeper by testing and intervention until the solution is found.

I believe that many Pennsylvania teachers are highly trained, have participated in LETRS training (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) as per PaTTAN and Intermediate Units and truly can offer excellent instruction to students. Yet, the PA PSSA scores<sup>4</sup> for 2022 English Language Arts Grade 3 show that only 53.6% as proficient or above. We are failing nearly half of our students in Grade 3 meaning they are lacking in the essential reading skills needed to be a competent reader. As a trainer, I would share with teachers that they are not to feel guilty...they often do because they “should” know how to do this after all they spent thousands of dollars in college, passed the teaching credential assessment, have been state certified, and yet, still may struggle understanding how to reach some students. I often told my workshop participants, “You are not responsible for what you do not know. But, once you know, after this training, you are responsible.”

Professional development must be ongoing, intentional, and fruitful in ensuring success. All Pennsylvania students deserve to be readers, spellers, and writers. That is accomplished by ensuring that teacher certification programs in higher education are teaching the essential skills of reading and spelling, that Teaching Certificate Assessments are also aligned with testing for this knowledge and skill, and that the instructional materials used for general reading instruction, interventions, and assessments are aligned with what decades of science has shown to be effective.

There is also a fiscal responsibility component supporting excellent first instruction by a teacher trained in the science of reading. Special education is expensive. Many students who are

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<sup>4</sup> PSSA English Language Arts Results (2022).  
<https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Assessments/Pages/PSSA-Results.aspx>

in special education for reading difficulties are there because they did not have the initial instruction that gave them the best opportunity to learn and, even more concerning, their special educators have less experience in teaching reading difficulties or dyslexia than the reading specialists. The IEP (Individualized Education Plan) requires that a “group of qualified professionals and the parents look at the child’s evaluation results. Together, they decide if the child is a “child with a disability,” as defined by IDEA.”<sup>5</sup> Let’s consider...are we truly bringing “qualified” professionals to the table if they are lacking in the ability to dive deeply into the reason for a student’s lack of progress in obtaining literacy skills? Have we placed student after student into special education services when in fact they have “dystaughtia” (have not been taught according to their needs)?

On the ‘Evaluation Report (ER-Annotated) form<sup>6</sup> to determine eligibility for special education services, there is a determination made using a two-pronged question: Does the student have a disability? Does the student need specially designed instruction? Further, the form requests evidence that “data demonstrating that prior to referral or as part of the referral process for a specific learning disability, the **student’s regular education instruction was delivered by qualified personnel**”<sup>7</sup> How confident are we, in light of this testimony, that this is truly the case?

Respectfully Submitted,

Wendy S Farone, PhD

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.ed-law.com/sample-annotated-iep-pennsylvania.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pattan.net/assets/PaTTAN/aa/aab2daae-1366-425a-85e3-5dc087cae4bd.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pattan.net/assets/PaTTAN/aa/aab2daae-1366-425a-85e3-5dc087cae4bd.pdf> (p. 16)