

HOUSE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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**TESTIMONY
OF**

**DR. LISA LENHART
DIRECTOR OF THE LEBRON JAMES FAMILY
FOUNDATION SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF AKRON**

AND

**DR. GAIL EVANCHAN
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF INSTRUCTION AT THE
LEBRON JAMES FAMILY FOUNDATION SCHOOL OF
EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON**

MAY 22, 2024

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee: thank you for this opportunity to tell you about all the exciting things happening at The University of Akron (UA) regarding the science of reading (SOR) in our coursework and through our Center for Structured Literacy (CSL). My name is Dr. Lisa Lenhart, and I serve as Director of the LeBron James Family Foundation (LJFF) School of Education at The University of Akron.

I am going to present an overview and history of our SOR implementation and our LJFF School of Education. When I am finished, my colleague, Dr. Gail Evanchan, will discuss how we have aligned our courses to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) Standards and how we teach SOR. Let me begin with a brief history of SOR at UA. UA has a long history of teaching reading using scientific based reading research (SBRR). In 2000, UA was part of a three-university state consortium awarded Reading First dollars through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to provide professional development using only SBRR teaching methods. We did this work in Ohio's lowest income and highest poverty districts, and this impacted our instruction. So SOR is not new to us, which has positioned us well to meet the requirements of current legislation.

Let me highlight some recent external reviews of our program. In 2020 the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reviewed our syllabi and gave us an A+ rating. In the same year, we applied for and received a Dean's Compact Grant to further refine existing core reading courses to align with the science of reading. In 2023 NCTQ once again reviewed our syllabi, and this time, as Shannon Holston from NCTQ testified last week, they also looked at *contrary* practices. We had some of these in our assessment course and so we earned a B which is listed in the Fordham Foundation report. However, as Dr. Evanchan will explain in a few moments, adjustments were made, syllabi were reviewed again by NCTQ, and we now have an A rating.

In addition to external positive reviews of our program, we have received external financial support for our program, which allowed us to expand our reach and capacity. In the summer of 2023, Mr. Joe Kanfer, an Akron businessman, former CEO of GOJO and current Venturer at GOJO, approached us to discuss support for our reading teacher education program. Over the course of the summer, we developed a proposal to establish an International Dyslexia Association (IDA) accredited Center for Structured Literacy (CSL) to prepare and apprentice future teachers in the SOR and SL through coursework and practicum. We will be the only public university in Ohio to provide this accreditation and certification.

Further, this opportunity provided by Mr. Kanfer allows our faculty, already steeped in SOR, to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to follow a strict SL delivery model. By including both full-time and part-time faculty, we are setting a path which ensures fidelity and sustainability for the program. By including administrators from APS, we gain buy-in from our respected educational partners.

We hired Rebecca Tolson as a consultant. Rebecca chairs the Ohio Dyslexia Committee and serves on the Ohio Dyslexia Legislation Committee. Once our doctoral student, now Rebecca is our trainer. Since October Rebecca has been leading both full time and part time faculty on a program of study that has a minimum of ninety training hours, and each one is currently tutoring 1:1 with an APS student using a SL program. This training, practicum, and the passage of the

Knowledge and Practice Examination for Effective Reading Instruction (KPEERI) Exam, which measures an educator’s knowledge of the principles and practices of Structured Literacy, will allow each of us to be certified as Structured Literacy/Dyslexia Interventionists.

In the fall of 2023, we had the opportunity to apply for a Third Frontier grant to expand the work of the CSL. We were awarded \$950,000 to align our syllabi to SL, purchase and embed SOR/SL modules into our undergraduate coursework, develop more modules related to SOR, and launch a SL practicum within APS for our undergraduate students. This will allow us to help APS build capacity within their district.

Students at UA will now have, over the course of their 12-credit hour reading coursework, the same professional training the faculty are currently undergoing, including the practicum. This will allow UA students to also take the KPEERI exam and leave college as certified Structured Literacy/Dyslexia Interventionists.

I am now going to turn this over to Dr. Gail Evanchan who can talk specifically about the content in our reading coursework. Dr. Evanchan is an associate professor of instruction at the LBJFF School of Education at The University of Akron.

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee: thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today about the content in our reading coursework. As Dr. Lenhart said, in 2020 we applied for and received the Dean’s Compact Grant to refine existing core literacy courses and to align our syllabi with SOR. In addition, full time and adjunct literacy faculty participated in a Kilpatrick book study and completed two years of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) Training.

I was charged with aligning the syllabi of the core literacy courses with the SOR. At that time, we incorporated the definition of the SOR as a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. Along with continuing our focus on the 5 essentials of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—the following theories to support the SOR were threaded throughout all syllabi: research on how the brain learns to read, the simple view of reading (SVR), Scarborough’s reading rope, 4- part processor, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and Ehri’s and Chall’s stages of reading development. Instructional practices and assessments aligned with the SOR for word recognition and language comprehension were also included. This approach excludes previously popular versions of texts by authors such as Clay, Fountas and Pinnell, and Calkins.

At that time, we removed the once-popular ‘3-cueing system’ and other contrary practices as part of our coursework. Instead, we now focus on assessments based in phonological awareness, spelling inventories, fluency probes for automaticity, accuracy and comprehension. Removing practices such as balanced literacy models and guiding reading and adding an intensified focus on vocabulary instruction led to the improved success with our outside reviews that Lisa discussed earlier. Our vocabulary instruction is a good example. We now focus on specific word instruction in vocabulary, word learning strategies, and word consciousness. After the resubmission, we received an A from NCTQ.

In the summer of 2023, when we became the Center for Structured Literacy, we once again reviewed and realigned our syllabi. The SOR has proven that a structured literacy approach is a necessary foundation for reading success. Even though we introduce our students to structured literacy, we will now require them to follow a structured literacy process using a structured literacy program while field teaching in EDCI:340 (Vocabulary, Comprehension and Writing) and EDCI:445 (Assessment and Instruction in Literacy).

In addition to improving structured literacy instruction, we realigned the courses using the ODHE 12-hour reading standards and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and Knowledge and Practice Standards (KPS) with the 2025 Science of Reading Audit Metrics.

As you can see, the transition to SOR, even for an institution with a history of teaching SL, is a significant shift that needs to focus on curriculum revision, curriculum development, and training for all involved. UA is on the leading edge of this shift, and we look forward to being a resource for other higher education institutions, K-12 schools, and students of all ages across Ohio.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you our progress and accomplishments at The University of Akron (UA) regarding the science of reading (SOR) at our Center for Structured Literacy. Dr. Lenhart and I are happy to answer questions.