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Chairwoman Peggy Lehner and members of the Education Committee

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Parent

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Chairwoman Peggy Lehner and members of the Education Committee:

I am here today to testify in favor of Senate Bill 102, a bill to establish a Dyslexia screening program for schools. As an Ohio educator and the parent of a late-identified Ohio public school student with dyslexia, I am extremely passionate about early identification and access to Structured Literacy for students in need. Ohio Lawmakers and educators need to take every possible step to prevent children from experiencing the significant detrimental effects of prolonged reading failure.

Our daughter was in Kindergarten when we moved into our current home. We initially searched for a home in Upper Arlington, but ultimately landed in a different district, unaware that decision would result in 24 months of pain, anxiety, and frustration for our daughter. Upper Arlington is an example of a school district that has carefully crafted dyslexia screening procedures, clear decision-making rules that guide placement, and prompt access to Structured Literacy for students who meet criteria. If we had purchased a home in Upper Arlington, our daughter would have been screened and immediately identified as having a double-deficit in phonological awareness and rapid naming skills. She would have promptly accessed Structured Literacy instruction as a student who showed the markers for dyslexia. Instead, our daughter was placed into a constructivist reading intervention in which she was taught “cues” for guessing words, such as looking at the first letter of the word and looking at the picture to see what would make sense. This instruction taught her to guess at words rather than decode them systematically. These strategies also overloaded her working memory, which is a problem for many students with dyslexia. She failed, but the district continued with additional constructivist interventions. 24 months later, after we paid for an outside evaluation and hired an advocate to represent our daughter, she finally accessed the appropriate Structured Literacy instruction that matched her needs as a student with dyslexia. Her rapid growth after her transition to Structured Literacy instruction was truly astonishing, but we were left feeling sick knowing that history was repeating itself with other students across our district.

Research by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institute of Health (NIH) has established beyond question that the most effective form of instruction for students with dyslexia is a system that employs a direct, explicit, systematic, sequential and multi-sensory approach to overtly teach the phonological structure of the language. In 2016, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) Board of Directors identified “Structured Literacy” as a term that encompasses approaches to reading instruction that conform with IDA’s Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading. Unfortunately, Ohio public school students have inequitable access to Structured Literacy. That is, in most school districts, students with a dyslexic profile cannot receive this type of instruction unless they are on an IEP; in many districts, even then, there is a lack of trained teachers to provide this essential instruction.

Is it equitable that students are screened for dyslexia and access Structured Literacy instruction in Upper Arlington, but in most other Ohio public school districts, the students require an IEP? Is it equitable that students in some Ohio public school districts have no access to Structured Literacy instruction at all? Is it equitable that resourced parents in privileged areas use personal funding to access private evaluations and trained specialists, along with paid advocates to help them navigate the system while students from traditionally marginalized populations suffer?

A group of concerned parents formed a network in our district and started hosting support group sessions. The stories are heart-breaking and we see a clear pattern of mental health issues connected with delayed reading. Students with dyslexia have anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions two to five times greater than their peers. In addition, our prisons have a higher population of inmates with dyslexia. The ripple effects of not being able to read and succeed in school are staggering.

Specifically, parents of students with dyslexia in our district are advocating for:

- Universal dyslexia screening beginning in Kindergarten.
- A district-wide definition of evidenced-based instruction specifically designed for students with dyslexia (Structured Literacy).
- A continuum of Structured Literacy services available for students beginning in Kindergarten.
- Prompt access to Structured Literacy instruction for all students who display potential characteristics of dyslexia (available for both general and special education populations).

Our local parent group recently joined OH-KID, a statewide coalition advocating for Ohio’s one in five students with dyslexia to receive proper screening and equitable access to intervention and remediation using Structured Literacy instruction with fidelity. We are inspired by districts like Marysville who are modeling that districts can use a multi-tiered system of support to

identify students with dyslexic profiles as early as kindergarten and address students' learning needs through evidence-based instruction and assessment specifically designed for students with dyslexia. Marysville illustrates that reading failure can be prevented. Senate Bill 102 lays a foundation for removing the inequities that exist within Ohio public schools regarding early identification and treatment for dyslexia.

Sincerely,

Sara Hallermann