

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the State Superintendent of Education



Public Hearing on
B22-0781, the “Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018”
B22-0512, the “Commission on Literacy Establishment Act of 2017”
and
The State of Literacy Efforts

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Education
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

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Council of the District of Columbia
Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
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Good morning, Chairman Grosso, councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Education. My name is Shavonne Gibson, and I serve as the Assistant Superintendent of the Division of Teaching and Learning at the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). I am pleased to testify on OSSE's role in the state of literacy efforts in the District of Columbia. This morning, I would like to highlight some of the work that OSSE undertakes to support increased literacy for DC residents of all ages, and I will provide some thoughts on the two bills before the Committee today, Bill 22-0781, the "Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018," and Bill 22-0512, the "Commission on Literacy Establishment Act of 2017."

As a new member of the Superintendent's team at OSSE, I lead the agency's newest division, which is charged with assessing instructional needs in our public schools and taking steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Student achievement requires excellent instructional leadership, and I look forward to supporting our collective work to improve teacher effectiveness and instruction across all of our schools.

Grounded by my experience as a Principal, Director of Instruction, and Managing Director of Schools at City Center Public Charter Schools, I understand the importance of ensuring that every child has a strong foundation in, and finds joy in, reading. Pathways to the middle class depend on a strong foundation in literacy, and we are working hard to lay that foundation.

Literacy Efforts

Through our adoption of the Common Core of State Standards in Reading and Language Arts, the District of Columbia has set a high bar for what our students should be able to do. Beginning in 3rd grade, students are assessed on those academic standards using the PARCC English/Language Arts (ELA) assessment. Since 2015, the first year of PARCC, the District has seen steady increases in the number of students deemed college and career ready in English and Language Arts. We are pleased with this improvement, yet we know that far too many students - particularly students of color, economically disadvantaged, and/or those with a disability - are not meeting expectations. We must continue to challenge our practices and policies to address these disparities in achievement.

Although OSSE does not provide direct instruction to students in reading, we do support investments in statewide approaches to improve literacy for Washingtonians of all ages. I would like to highlight a few of these efforts.

A significant part of a child's brain development occurs in the first few years of life, and that's why our investments in early child care and universal Pre-K are foundational to ensuring that every child in the Districts gets off to a good start. We also know that how early child care educators interact with our youngest children makes a real difference. OSSE's Division of Early Learning provides e-Learning courses for our early childhood education workforce free of charge. These courses cover topics such as phonological awareness and language development. Other courses include effective storytelling that broaden and deepen children's learning and identifying signs of delay to target children's specific needs as early as possible.

OSSE also administers early literacy grants that support efforts in schools to improve reading for students before they reach 3rd grade. In FY18, OSSE awarded \$1.2M to the Literacy Lab, which provides daily evidence-based literacy intervention and \$400k to Reading Partners, an organization that aims to

produce improvement in reading skills and proficiency, improve student academic behaviors in the classroom, and provide literacy interventions to LEAs.

With the DC Workforce Investment Council (WIC), OSSE administers grants that help adult learners earn a secondary credential and simultaneously receive occupational and industry-specific training. These grants support Integrated Education and Training (IE&T) programs that reduce the amount of time it takes for adult learners to become prepared for gainful employment along a career pathway. OSSE supports 10 sub-grantees that support adult learners with literacy and numeracy skills at the first-grade level, the 12th-grade level, or anywhere in between. Further, during FY19 \$500,000 will be available through a competitive grant process in November 2018 to serve adult learners' reading below the fifth grade level.

Next, I would like to turn to the bills before the Committee today.

Blind Student Literacy & Education Act

Every child, no matter their disability, is entitled to a free and appropriate public education. OSSE stands with the bill's sponsors on the intent of this proposal; however, we have some concerns. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Pub.L. 101-476) and local law are already designed to ensure a child with a visual impairment is provided with the opportunity to access education. Further, if families believe they are not afforded such opportunities, they may access dispute resolution protections.

The legislation relies on the definition of blind person in D.C. Code 7-1009 to define a blind or visually impaired child. Visual impairment can run a wide gamut of conditions, and the definition in the bill is too narrow.

IDEA already requires the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to take special considerations for blind or visually impaired students similar to those contemplated in this legislation. The IEP team must provide instruction in Braille unless the IEP team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, and including an evaluation of the child's future needs, that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate. Current laws and regulations require many of the components listed in the legislation: evaluation results¹, date of service², length of period of instruction³, and measurable goals⁴. That said, the additional requirements in Lines 59-60 and 66-71 are concerning because they create additional hurdles for and require explanations from IEP teams when Braille isn't included in a student's IEP. Braille is one accommodation of many for visually impaired students, and the bill assumes a presumption of Braille and inappropriately places it on IEP teams and students.

Further, the standard contemplated for the instruction of Braille in lines 53 through 56 is problematic. This part of the bill requires instruction in Braille to be sufficient to enable a blind or visually impaired child to communicate with the same level of proficiency expected of a child's peers of comparable ability and grade level. This is not the standard used in IDEA. IEPs are not based on comparable levels of proficiency to other children; rather, they are based on the individual needs of the child. Consistent with

¹ 5-E DCMR §3006.5(b)

² 34 CFR §300.320(a)(7)

³ *Id.*

⁴ 34 CFR §300.320.(a)(2)(i)

the US Supreme Court decision in *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)*, IEPs should be “reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress in light of the child’s circumstances.”⁵

OSSE is also concerned about lines 79-84, which requires teachers working with visually impaired students to be competent in reading and writing Braille. Currently, OSSE awards the Special Education: Categorical Visual Impairments credential, which does not require reading and writing proficiency in Braille. However, in order to obtain this teaching credential, applicants must successfully pass the Praxis exam, Special Education: Teaching Students with Visual Impairments. This Praxis exam does not require proficiency in reading and writing Braille, yet it does assess the extent that teachers are able to use a wide range of assistive technologies for visually impaired students. The exam also assesses the instructor’s ability to select, obtain, modify, adapt, and create instructional materials including tactile graphics, Braille, large print, and other technologies for students. OSSE is concerned that requiring an assessment of all credential holders may create barriers to finding teachers that are equipped to work with visually impaired students even if they do not use Braille.

Commission on Literacy Establishment Act

Finally, OSSE supports the intent of the legislation that establishes the Commission on Literacy. Lines 67-69 require the Commission to cooperate with OSSE to develop materials that support the teaching of reading comprehension and literacy. OSSE has no concern with obtaining the Commission’s input, yet OSSE does not directly develop materials of this nature. OSSE procures various instructional resources that have demonstrated promise, but we do not develop them directly. OSSE looks forward to hearing public feedback on how the District can improve literacy instruction and supports for all residents of the District of Columbia.

Improving the state of literacy throughout the District of Columbia is of great importance to OSSE, and we will continue to support those efforts in collaboration with the Mayor, our sister agencies, and the Council. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before the Committee today on this important matter. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have for me at this time.

⁵ See: *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)*