



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

## Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education & Committee on State and Federal Legislation

### Re: New Phonics Based Curriculum and Dyslexia Screening in NYC Public Schools

December 14, 2023

#### Board of Directors

Kimberley D. Harris, *President*

Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*

Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*

Eric F. Grossman, *President Emeritus*

Carmita Alonso

Matt Berke

Whitney Chatterjee

Matt Darnall

Jessica A. Davis

Brian Friedman

Caroline J. Heller

Jamie A. Levitt, *past president*

Maura K. Monaghan

Jon H. Oram

Jonathan D. Polkes

Ashish Shah

Veronica M. Wissel

#### Executive Director

Kim Sweet

#### Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Sarah Part, and I am the Senior Policy Analyst at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). For more than 50 years, Advocates for Children has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds.

Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the school system, including many families whose children are struggling with reading. We routinely work with middle and high school students who are still non-readers—not because they lack the motivation or cognitive capacity to learn to read, but because the public schools failed to provide evidence-based instruction and intervention.

Literacy is the gateway to all future learning, and AFC has long advocated for New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) to institute guardrails around English language arts (ELA) curricula. There is an enormous body of research on how children learn to read and a firm consensus as to the defining features of effective instruction. Leaving the choice of curriculum up to individual schools, however, resulted in tremendous inconsistency and widespread use of programs grounded in discredited theories of reading development rather than in the scientific evidence. And while some children will become proficient readers no matter how they are taught, they are the exception rather than the rule. Without explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills and access to a knowledge-building curriculum, many will struggle unnecessarily and never learn to read as well as they could.

At AFC, we see the consequences: students who are unable to read menus and job applications, let alone their academic textbooks; whose self-esteem and mental health suffers; and whose understandable frustrations with reading manifest in disruptive behavior and disengagement from school. That's why we're supportive of the effort NYCPS is making to shift away from balanced literacy and towards curricula that align with the science of reading.



## Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

---

By improving core instruction, we can prevent many reading difficulties before they occur. However, there will always be some students who need extra support, and New York City also needs a robust literacy safety net that identifies such students and matches them with intensive intervention. While universal screening is *one component* of such a safety net, it should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. The point of identifying students who are struggling with reading or who have language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia is to ensure those students receive the targeted help they need to become strong readers. NYCPS must ensure that schools have the training, personnel, and infrastructure necessary to use screening data to inform instruction and provide timely, evidence-based small-group or one-on-one intervention to all students who need it.

Finally, we would like to emphasize that shifting what happens in thousands of individual classrooms on a day-to-day basis is going to take time. There are no silver bullets in public education, and when it comes to the science of reading, New York City is just getting started. We want to ensure that current budgetary pressures and the understandable desire to see results quickly do not lead to policymakers abandoning the current effort before it even has a chance to succeed.

We urge the Council to remain steadfast in the commitment to ensuring that all schools are using reading curricula with proven effectiveness and to push the school system to provide all students—including those who have disabilities like dyslexia—with the intervention and support they need.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.