



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the New York State Education Department Dyslexia and Dysgraphia Task Force

Re: Dyslexia and Dysgraphia

October 1, 2024

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, AFC 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, AFC helps thousands of families navigate the New York City school system, including many families whose children are struggling with reading and have been unable to get the help they need within the public schools. We thank NYSED for its attention to this critical issue.

The experiences of other states suggest that truly moving the needle on literacy requires a comprehensive approach—not a piecemeal one—as well as a substantial and sustained commitment of resources. New York must strengthen teacher preparation programs; provide educators already in the classroom with ongoing coaching and support; require use of evidence-based curricula that build content knowledge and provide explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills; institute universal screening for reading difficulties to help identify students who need additional support, before they fall behind; and ensure all students have access to a robust system of intervention and support. To the extent that the task force recommends legislative changes to improve literacy instruction and better meet the needs of students with dyslexia, such legislation must come with funding attached.

With respect to screening and intervention, the following are essential if policy changes are to have the intended impact:

- Districts must use validated, bias-free, linguistically appropriate screening instruments that directly measure children's skills (i.e., that do not rely solely on teacher or parent observation).
- Educators must receive the training necessary to effectively administer and interpret the results of such screeners.
- Students flagged by the screener must receive timely, evidence-based reading intervention from a well-trained teacher or reading specialist. Interventions must be aligned with core instruction, intensive, age-appropriate, responsive to progress monitoring data, and targeted to individual needs.

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- Core instruction must be aligned with the science of reading. Screeners are not designed to tease out who has a disability and who has weak decoding skills because they have never been taught appropriately.

Moreover, screeners cannot diagnose dyslexia, and we are concerned that the use of the term “dyslexia screening” muddies the water by conflating two very different types of assessments. When parents reach out to AFC, they know their children are not reading at grade level; screening does not provide any new information. Districts and schools must have the ability not just to screen, but to conduct robust, high-quality evaluations when a disability like dyslexia is suspected, and to provide the support necessary for such students to make meaningful progress.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.