



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be submitted to the New York City Council Committees on Education and Mental Health, Developmental Disability, Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Disability Services

RE: Oversight: Addressing the Needs of Students with Dyslexia and Related Language-Based Learning Disabilities

Advocates for Children of New York
April 19, 2016

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Good afternoon. My name is Maggie Moroff. I am the Special Education Policy Coordinator at Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) and am testifying today on AFC's behalf. I also work as the Coordinator of the ARISE Coalition. I'd like to speak with you this afternoon on the need to make certain that our public schools are prepared to provide all students, including those with dyslexia and other disabilities, with appropriate, evidence-based literacy instruction.

AFC is a not-for-profit organization that works to protect the rights of New York City's most vulnerable students, including students with dyslexia and other disabilities. We have been doing that work for over 40 years. For decades, parents have come to us desperate for help because their child needs more support in learning to read. Typically, these parents are frustrated and scared, having hit wall after wall in advocating for their child. As the mother of a 13-year-old daughter with a learning disability explained to us:

"I've done everything. I've done everything a parent is supposed to do. I had her in Early Intervention. I worked with her after school. I made sure that she did the work. And she doesn't have a behavior issue, she doesn't have attendance issues. So, like now she's 13 years old, I want her to be able to go to college. How can she ever go to college if she's not at grade level? How can she ever have a future without higher education?"

Undoubtedly, it should be an educational priority to teach this young girl, and others like her who have dyslexia and other disabilities, to read. But we know from speaking with families day after day that far too many of these students have not had access to the targeted, research-based literacy instruction they so desperately need to advance in school and function in society when they leave school. Test data confirms the problem, with less than 7% of students with IEPs in grades 3-8 who take the State's ELA exams achieving proficient scores.

Recently, AFC released a report, *A is for All: Meeting the Literacy Needs of Students with and without Disabilities in the New York City Public Schools* (http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/a_is_for_all.pdf) where we reviewed research on literacy instruction and highlighted several promising programs in the



City. In the report, we made a number of recommendations relevant to today's topic. Specifically we urged that the DOE:

- Develop a comprehensive, multi-year plan to meet the literacy needs of all students, including those with dyslexia and other disabilities.
- Prepare and support classroom teachers by building literacy expertise in every school, including elementary, middle, and high schools, District 75 schools and District 79 programs. The Mayor's Reading for All initiative, which will train on-site reading coaches to support literacy instruction in grades K-2, is a great start. Teaching colleges need to step up to the plate as well and produce graduates who are prepared to deliver evidence-based instruction to struggling readers.
- Use technology – Assistive Technology and Accessible Educational Materials - to support instruction; and
- Improve communication with families, making families true partners in the work ahead to improve literacy rates. Families need to know how to support their children's literacy development and how to get help when current strategies don't seem to be working.

Of course, it should go without saying that all these reading supports and literacy instruction must be provided to students who are English Language Learners with language supports as necessary.

There is no more time to waste. Students who don't learn to read in grade school are in danger of increased behavioral and mental health challenges as they get older. They are far less likely to graduate from high school, which, not surprisingly, corresponds to an increased likelihood they'll live their adult lives below the poverty line. We can't blame the students or their disabilities for the dismal outcomes. Rather, the system has repeatedly failed to provide necessary and appropriate supports. It's not too late to turn this around. With adequate resources, dedicated teacher preparation, and a strong commitment from everyone involved, school staff won't have to struggle to teach reading, students won't have to struggle to read, and parents won't have to fear that their children, regardless of whether or not they have dyslexia or another disability, won't leave school as readers.

In keeping with our testimony, we would like to add our support to the resolution before the Council calling for the State Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign A 4330 and S 5439 regarding the certification or training of teachers, administrators and instructors in the area of dyslexia and related disorders.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.