**ESSA Response, July 14, 2017**

**Literacy (ES, MS, HS) is measured by the percent of students demonstrating reading comprehension at or above the lower bound of the College & Career Ready “Stretch” Lexile Band for each grade level or course. The link between reading on grade level and successful outcomes has been documented through research (DeWalt et al, 2004; Heckman, 2006; Hanemann, 2015; Morrisroe, 2014; Feister, 2010; Hernandez, 2012). Hernandez (2012) found that “about 16 percent of children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers” (pg.4). Georgia’s rigorous content standards promote that students should be ready for college or career upon exiting high school. One of the most important factors for readiness is a student’s ability to read and understand texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. The Lexile framework is the measure used to assess student grade level reading ability by measuring both the complexity of texts and a student's ability to comprehend these texts. The Lexile score provides a measure of the reading proficiency of the student in relation to the complexity of the text (MetaMetrics, 2017).**

“Literacy has become the umbrella term for communication involving print but also other types of information (visual images, auditory, video and combinations thereof….Some interpretations of (multiple literacies) are benign; others seem likely to maintain, even rationalize disparities between readers and non-readers.” Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, 2017 Basic Books.

What the state’s ESSA plan talks about related to Literacy fails to take into account several key factors: the underrepresentation of children who are either not diagnosed with Dyslexia at an age where appropriate, meaningful intervention would have the greatest effect (before third grade) or who are diagnosed as Dyslexic and whose schools fail to provide an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for that student or keeping Dyslexics from receiving appropriate, meaningful intervention by forcing them into Response to Intervention programs that rob students of valuable remediation time

**“**The law (IDEA) is not intended to allow schools to avoid evaluating kids who are suspected of having a disability, or keeping a child in RTI over a long period of time.**”**Wrightslaw.

In other words, what the laws (ESSA and IDEA) provide children doesn’t translate into appropriate, meaningful intervention for those of us whose children are Dyslexic in districts across the state that refuse to even say the word Dyslexia, instead, hiding behind the designation of Specific Learning Disability (SLD).

We know what works for Dyslexic children to succeed. It requires structured literacy taught with fidelity by teachers who are trained in methods like Orton-Gillingham. It also requires schools to appropriately respond to their duty in Child Find to determine the source of learning issues earlier rather than string out a child’s repeated failures over an elementary school career; to collect data and use that to base the correct intervention specifically to the needs of the child. My child.

To illustrate using my son’s experience in what is considered “the best” elementary school in our county, not a single one of his small group teachers from EIP in Kindergarten through fifth grade had any level of instruction in multi-sensory structured literacy. The small group teacher in first grade was out with personal issues so much that the school staff failed to recognize that my son’s phonemic awareness was minimal at best at the end of first grade. After having my son go through year after year of ineffective reading instruction taught with no fidelity by teachers with two hours of “training” from some person at the district and making no progress, I asked the school to test his phonemic awareness in March 2017---a few months before he left the fifth grade. He knew approximately HALF the sound-letter correspondences. Whereas it did give us a road map to help fill in his deficiencies, I have a greater problem with teachers who continually failed to recognize that he didn’t have the building blocks necessary to read proficiently at a level higher than second grade. This is a child, who, for each year of school had three or more teachers working with him both in the co-taught setting as well as EIP and then Small Group. I had a now-retired Principal tell me to paper my house with Post-It Notes representing every conceivable word when I knew full well that Whole Language instruction has been fully discredited for use with Dyslexic students. When a school says they take a “balanced approach” to literacy, that’s not so secret code that says we simply won’t do what’s needed, but we’ll try everything but what really works, which is structured literacy. And it’s a shame, educational malpractice really, because structured literacy can help all learning readers become successful.

The state of Georgia appears to be failing to identify children with Specific Learning Disabilities according to the Georgia State Snapshot put together by the National Center for Learning Disabilities using data from the 2013-2014 school year. Nationally, 12.2% of students received special education (in other words, had services through an IEP) where Georgia reported 11.2%. When the standard measure for Dyslexia alone---excluding everything else lumped under SLD---is roughly 20%, it’s clear that the state has a long way to go in both identification and providing meaningful interventions to students both with Dyslexia and the other Specific Learning Disabilities. I’ve heard stories from countless parents who have gone out and had their child privately tested in an effort to get them help, only to have the public school refuse to accept the findings, refuse eligibility for an IEP, and allow that child damage to their self-concept as a result of feeling stupid because they are ineffectively taught. These kids account for SIGNIFICANTLY higher numbers of discipline referrals, suspensions, and abandonment of high school before graduation.   
  
My own son has struggled with discipline issues over the years, exacerbated by a classmate the school refused the reassign. I asked for a Functional Behavior Analysis in 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade and 5th grade. I finally got an FBA and a BIP by January of 2017, the same month that other student left the school. My son experienced an immediate transformation once the other student left. It truly felt as though the school cared less about helping my son be successful in the classroom rather than taking appropriate action, following through on an FBA they started in 2nd grade. My son’s elementary school career from start to finish was an exercise in futility, frustration, and failure to act. He heads into middle school in two weeks reading at slightly better than a second-grade level, where he will be offered Read 180, which is a program that the What Works Clearinghouse very clearly states does not provide proper instruction for those with Dyslexia. And the school district does this and yet my pointing that out in our IEP meeting means nothing to them.

Georgia needs to set rigorous goals that are the same for all groups of students, including those with learning and attention issues. It should provide school districts with the financial support necessary to train all elementary teachers in a basic understanding of Dyslexia. I recently took the Dyslexia Awareness Module that the State of Virginia requires of newly licensed teachers and those seeking license renewal. It would go a long way in establishing a base level understanding of Dyslexia among teachers in the state and help dispel the multitude of myths those of us with a knowledge of the disorder have to dispel on a regular basis with teachers and administrators alike.

Georgia needs to ensure that test participation matters so parents and advocates have an accurate measure of how students are doing. Again, using my children as an example: my elder son regularly scores in the 99th percentile on tests like the IOWA, CoGAT and Milestones. The younger Dyslexic son has scored so low as to receive letters from our school promising extra specialized instruction (at least that’s what the letter implied), only to have the Principal say “That’s not really what that letter means. We’re just going to watch him.” Watch him fail. I’m waiting to see what those dreadful Milestones look like this year. Last year, in one ELA section, he did not attempt 80 questions. So not only is the test not at all valid, it served no purpose other than to reinforce that this school wasn’t doing what needed to be done to help remediate my child’s reading deficiencies.

Georgia needs to make sure schools are responsible for helping all groups of students learn. That’s easy. Make sure that you’re helping dyslexic children be successful students from the very beginning by insisting that the Georgia Regents ensure that every teacher coming out of our public university system with a degree in Early Childhood Education and/or Special Education has a curriculum that includes at the very least required Teacher level training in Structured Literacy such as Orton-Gillingham. I should not have to explain to my son’s fifth-grade special education teacher that it would be helpful if they sounded out phonemes using shaving cream on a tray while tracing the letters. I should not have to spend $180 a week ensuring that my son receives Orton-Gillingham tutoring twice a week to remediate extreme deficiencies heading into middle school.

The state’s implementation of ESSA matters a great deal because my dyslexic son’s future success matters a great deal. He has much to offer the world and at the very least, he should be taught how to read in school the way he needs to be taught.

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