



Open Letter Regarding Literacy in Colorado April 2019

An open letter from COKID - Colorado Kids Identified with Dyslexia (www.cokid.org) to the Members of the General Assembly, Education Committees, Colorado Education Association, Colorado Association of School Executives, Colorado Association of School Boards:

Who We Are

COKID, Colorado Kids Identified with Dyslexia, is a grassroots advocacy group with members who have been advocating in our respective districts for anywhere from 3 to 12 years. We have been active at the State level for a year now with representatives from parent groups across the state in order to have a greater presence in the legislative process. **Our mission is to ensure that all children in Colorado are literate and can read to the best of their ability.**

We became involved in literacy education because we have dyslexic children, and through our efforts to get the proper literacy instruction that works for them, we quickly recognized the lack of knowledge in the science of reading statewide was a major issue. Core to our mission is that all children deserve access to evidence-based instruction and intervention, and teachers deserve training and materials anchored in the foundations of reading and how to apply that knowledge to the classroom.

It is not unreasonable for us to ask our schools to teach our children to read. Literacy is an issue of equity and has long-reaching social, emotional and economic effects. We need to prioritize literacy in Colorado and align the practice of teaching reading with decades of science.

Why we are writing this letter

This year COKID has testified in committees for both HB19-1134 (Identification and Intervention for Students with Dyslexia) and SB19-199 (Read Act Implementation) and at the Colorado State Board of Education. We are troubled by the fact that stakeholder meetings did not include parents of struggling readers in SB 19-199. We believe that the children who are struggling to read are the **actual stakeholders** of this legislation, and parents representing them should be included in the process. Parents have valuable perspective and a bottom up view of what is actually happening in schools and in our homes and its impact on students. Because we feel we haven't been given access to stakeholder meetings and because we are very concerned by inaccuracies and misinformation that we have heard during testimony for these two bills we are writing this letter.

The Science of Reading

From Reading Rockets: Literature reviews of research on reading acquisition, reading instruction, and reading disabilities have converged on some basic conclusions with which few scholars of reading would disagree:

1. Children who are learning to read an alphabetic language such as English appear to pass through a series of common developmental stages.

2. In the earliest stages of learning to read, children's sensitivity to the sounds in spoken words (i.e., phonological awareness) greatly facilitates their developing word-analysis skills; children who lack this awareness have trouble learning to read.
3. Accurate and fluent word analysis is essential to good reading comprehension, especially as children grow older and encounter increasingly difficult texts.
4. Most beginning readers benefit from explicit instruction in word analysis (i.e., phonics instruction), and for youngsters who are vulnerable to reading difficulties, this instruction appears to be particularly important.
5. In order to become skilled readers, children need much more than just word-analysis instruction — among other things, they need good comprehension instruction and extensive experience reading a variety of texts, such as books, magazines, and newspapers.
6. Instructional approaches that attempt to "match" initial reading instruction to certain characteristics of the reader, notably modality preference, are generally ineffective.
7. Children who experience serious difficulties in learning to read, including those classified as having reading disabilities or dyslexia, typically have difficulties in the areas of phonological processing and word analysis.

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-science-offers-teachers-reading>

Decades of research has informed the federal legislation under IDEA and ESSA and defines the “essential components of reading instruction” (ECORI) to mean:

“Explicit and systematic instruction” in five specific areas, all of which are needed:

- (A) phonemic awareness,
- (B) phonics,
- (C) vocabulary development,
- (D) reading fluency, including oral reading skills, and
- (E) reading comprehension strategies

The testimony we have heard (some of which is transcribed here) is in contrast to what we are advocating for and to this research:

- *“Reading is... somewhat organic in nature and just like you can’t dictate or tell how a plant is going to grow it’s very difficult to force or dictate any sort of reading on a child and so I would hesitate to be that forceful in terms of being very prescriptive on it.”*
- *“It boils down to one idea. There are five components of reading and not one is more important than the other. Focusing on one area does not produce a solid reader.”*
- *“I always get a little nervous when I hear somebody mention this one curriculum or this one assessment works...”*

The language in SB 19-199 must include, at a minimum “explicit and systematic” and ideally “sequential, cumulative, and data-driven” in order to ensure that instruction aligns with these proven standards.

Balanced literacy programs, predominately used in Colorado and producing 60% of students NOT meeting expectations in reading, do not teach explicitly and systematically. Phonics instruction is “incidental” and not sufficient for many readers in such programs / practices. This science is not prescriptive of one program – many general education and intervention programs fulfill these requirements, but it does require explicit and systematic teaching of the foundations of reading. It is true that about 40% of students can learn to read with broad instruction, but 60% require explicit and systematic instruction. (Nancy Young, 2017: Lyon: 1998, NRP: 2000, IDA: 2005, Hempenstall, 2016). And the 40% of students will still learn to read and benefit from the instruction.

Many assessments and progress monitoring tools or combinations thereof can serve the purpose of helping teachers to identify at risk readers and guide instruction for struggling readers and assessing progress as long as the assessment dives into phonological awareness, phonemic memory, and rapid automatized naming – underlying predictive reading skills. Professional development must be provided to educators to use this data. The Early Literacy Grant (ELG) and Early Literacy Assessment Tool (ELAT) projects are doing this with success. We are not advocating for one curriculum or one assessment.

We are asking that teachers are trained in and instruct students in the components of reading that are lacking in reading instruction in Colorado: explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness in early grades.

Professional Development and Teacher Training

We believe professional development is the single most important avenue for improving literacy in Colorado. It is imperative that teachers understand how students acquire reading skills and the instructional practices that science has concluded are best for teaching reading skills. Significant amounts of time need to be allocated for teachers to become familiar with new strategies, skills and implementation challenges. We need to build an internal capacity at the district/school level to rely on experts to help build knowledge and skills to implement effective instruction. It is also essential that teachers are provided ongoing targeted and embedded support in the forms of literacy coaches to transfer this learning to the classrooms with practical hands-on practice and feedback. https://www.corelearn.com/infographic-6-principles-of-effective-teacher-professional-development-teacher-pd-aw/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMlo-eFy87a4QIVrR-tBh35ogRGEAMYAyAAEqK8XPD_BwE

The testimony we have heard (some of which is transcribed here) is in contrast to this research:

- *Testimony from Colorado Senate Education Committee hearing for SB 19-199 – 4/10/19 “...The impact of PD (Professional Development) is not a given. The process is organic. Teachers should participate in their own PD planning and identify what they need to learn and the learning experience that will lead to the mastery of the selected content or techniques.”*
- *Testimony from Melissa Colman of CDE to the State Board of Education, JBC, Joint Education Committee and in an interview with Chalkbeat: “That is truly an issue,” said Melissa Colman, associate commissioner of student learning at the Colorado Department of Education. “That is actually something we hear quite a bit from principals, literacy coaches, superintendents — that is, the need for teachers to understand the science of reading.” She went on to say that while Colorado’s teacher licensure standards do require the state’s teacher prep programs to cover the science of reading, half of the state’s teachers are trained elsewhere, their backgrounds an “unknown quantity.” [But as the state’s critique of the University of Northern Colorado’s prep program demonstrates, standards alone don’t guarantee that teachers are learning what they should.]*

School districts have overseen the planning and participation of their own professional development for decades in Colorado. As a result, literacy has been identified by CDE as a gaping hole in our state education system. As detailed in the State Systemic Improvement Plan report

(https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/ssip_colorado_phase3), produced by CDE:

“During the summer of 2016 CDE literacy specialists finalized the Teacher Knowledge Survey (See Appendix R) that would be administered to each participant at the initial Structured Literacy Training. The items on the Teacher Knowledge Survey are based on the work of Louisa Moats and are designed to assess teachers’ basic understanding of phonological awareness, English speech sounds, common structures and patterns of the English language, and the essential components of reading. Teacher awareness and knowledge in these areas is essential to effective early literacy instruction... Once scored, the Teacher Knowledge Survey results showed a composite average score of 46.92 points out of a possible

85 points for an average accuracy score of 55.20%. While there was a substantial difference between the lowest individual score (10 points/11.76%) and the highest individual score (82 points/96.47%), the majority of scores fell in the middle third indicating weak foundational literacy knowledge on the part of participating teachers.”

Further: One of the most significant challenges encountered has been the profound limitations found in participating teachers’ level of foundational literacy knowledge. The participating teachers’ performance on the Teacher Knowledge Survey yielded an average accuracy score of 55.2%. As CDE literacy specialists and coaches began project implementation, this underlying lack of foundational literacy knowledge has significantly impacted teachers’ understanding of the Primary Structured Literacy Scope and Sequence and their ability to effectively lesson plan. A considerable number of teachers participating in the project have limited or no knowledge of the concepts they are expected to include during direct and explicit instructional sessions. Another related challenge centers on poor knowledge of effective instructional and classroom practices and subsequent learning gaps.

From Chalkbeat’s article on teacher prep programs in Colorado universities

(<https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2019/03/14/concerned-about-reading-instruction-state-cracks-down-on-teacher-prep-programs-starting-with-colorados-largest/>):

“The reading courses at Colorado’s largest educator preparation program don’t match up with research on literacy instruction, and many of the professors have philosophies that contradict state standards, according to a scathing new critique by state evaluators.”

Mississippi provided all educators in Language Essentials for Teaching Reading and Spelling (LETRS, Moats) professional development. Teachers were trained over the course of two years in 2014-2015. The study did not look at student achievement in relation to the training, but Mississippi’s 4th grade NAEP scores increased by 6 percentile points between 2013-2017, demonstrating the second highest growth in the country.

https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2017270.pdf

The Literacy Certification in the first version of SB 19-199 was an excellent way to ensure that all Colorado educators learn the foundations of reading in literacy instruction. Unfortunately, this piece was taken out of the bill. We are missing an opportunity to provide our teachers with a course that the universities should have provided. Most teacher prep programs in Colorado are not offering adequate instruction based on research. Instead many of the programs are based on a pedagogy not supported by science. A literacy certification program would give all teachers a solid base of knowledge of teaching reading. As noted in the teacher survey within the SiMR project above, our teachers scored 55% when tested on that knowledge. Our teachers deserve to have the evidence-based knowledge and tools to help struggling readers.

Read Act / Plans

In conversations with teachers and reading specialists, themes have emerged across the state as to the common shortcomings of READ plan implementation.

1. The READ Act does not hold schools accountable for following the READ Act or writing/implementing READ Plans that are based on the science of reading. No one ever checks to make sure the students who need READ plans are given them or that they are written correctly and in a way that effectively monitors a student's progress.
2. Because of the absence of the science of reading in most teacher ed programs, most teachers do not understand what students need or how to get them there. As a result, the READ plans are often poorly written and the resulting interventions not as effective as they might be.
3. For those teachers without a background in the science of reading, the trainings available through CDE are not adequate to instruct teachers how to use the data provided or to use additional assessments to dig deeper to find the most foundational skill that has not been mastered. Too much emphasis at looking at

the composite score - a dangerous practice because it can mask serious deficiencies in one or more subtests.

4. The READ Act is very vague about how/when a student can come off the plan and gives almost no direction concerning keeping a student on a plan beyond 3rd grade. It needs to hold schools accountable to keep students on the Plan and continue providing interventions until the child reaches grade level or graduates.
5. The Act calls for READ Plans to be updated annually - but if checking for progress is the goal - then they should be updated much more frequently – possibly quarterly. If not, a whole year goes by before understanding that a student is not improving as they should be.

Public Literacy Campaign

Since dyslexia is the number one cause of reading failure, the public information campaign should include dyslexia awareness and signs and symptoms of dyslexia at different ages. Dyslexia is highly hereditary, so family history should be highlighted in a campaign. Pediatricians, parents and educators would benefit from this knowledge as well as the blessing to say the “D” word. There is a moat between educational vocabulary (Specific Learning Disability and Severe Reading Deficiency) and everyday terms – Dyslexia or Struggling Reader. We need to bridge that vocabulary gap.

Conclusion

The fact that only 40% of 3rd graders are reading at grade level is proof that what we are doing is not working for all children. Generally speaking, our teachers have not been taught the science of reading and need that foundation to help struggling readers. The science of reading has been verified countless times and it supports explicit and systematic instruction of the five principles of reading. By using balanced literacy curriculum, districts are not teaching students to read in the way that the majority of our students need. We are teaching to 40% that can learn to read easily and not providing explicit and systematic instruction that the other 60% require. Intervention is much more costly – economically and social/emotionally – than providing adequate general education curriculum. We believe the Certification requirement that was removed from SB19-199 would have been a great start in bridging the gap between the science of reading and the instructional practices in Colorado classrooms. Accountability and reporting are needed to ensure that school districts are providing evidence-based instruction and intervention. We are not going to move the needle on reading scores until students are taught the five components of reading explicitly and systematically – in general education and intervention. All three – accountability, reporting and professional development are necessary components for Colorado to improve reading scores – we can’t pick and choose.

Letters of Support

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to review this open letter from your COKID group. I believe it does a fine job summarizing the key elements of instruction necessary for substantially increasing the reading success of a large proportion of students. The gap between research on reading and classroom practice has been a long-standing problem that itself has been a focus of research. Your document highlights this problem and I'm pleased you are seeking to address it. I would have happily provided you with feedback on any element that was inconsistent with the research, but I feel you hit the proverbial nail on the head, and I have nothing to offer in terms of corrective feedback. I wish you the best with your efforts.

Dr. David Kilpatrick, Professor of Psychology, State University of New York, College at Cortland, New York State Certified School Psychologist

I support the efforts of COKID to improve reading instruction for all children in Colorado including those with dyslexia. They make a strong case for the need to assure that teachers are trained in the science of reading and that this knowledge is incorporated into the literacy curriculum for Colorado children.

-Dr. Hugh Catts, Florida State University, School of Communication Science & Director, Professor & Director

*I fully support the letter from COKID to the members of the CO General Assembly. Over the past 20 years working in schools around the state of CT (and several other states, including CO), I have seen first-hand that teachers are not adequately prepared to diagnostically assess and prescriptively teach children fundamental reading skills. Dyslexia's core deficit is in the area of phonological processing. In layperson's language, these individuals have difficulty processing (i.e., hearing and understanding) the sounds that make up words. Although most K-3 educators know the term **phonemic awareness** and some can even define it, they don't understand it well enough to teach it explicitly, effectively, and to mastery. Of the hundreds of teachers we've surveyed over the past 20 years, the average score on a test that demonstrates their understanding of the concept is **50%**. This means that most teachers don't know how to recognize when children struggle to master that all-important skill and equally important, they don't know how to teach the skill properly. And this is just one of many key concepts that teachers must master to be skilled practitioners.*

- Dr. Margie Gillis, President & Founder, Literacy How
