



MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Position statement on S.263 and H.579- An Act to promote high quality comprehensive literacy instruction

The Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (M.A.S.S.) oppose S.263 and H.579 - *An Act to promote high quality comprehensive literacy instruction*. We commend our state policy makers for seeking to address the persistent gap in reading proficiency levels among students at the third-grade level. We too, are interested in addressing reading disparities in our Commonwealth because we know fully proficient readers and writers will have greater academic success, career fulfillment, and engagement in our democracy.

We see in S.263 and H.579 - *An Act to promote high quality comprehensive literacy instruction*, the seeds of a long-term commitment by the Commonwealth to commit to and collaborate with all invested stakeholders on comprehensive and sustained collective action to address this long-standing issue. However, we believe there are limitations, redundancies, and concerns in this legislation as it is currently written. We share with you in this memo our areas of support and our areas for concern; in some areas, we have included brief recommendations for consideration.

- Overall, we must understand the complexity of teaching students to read proficiently which is more than teaching phonics - we must all understand the need for phonology, automaticity, language development, vocabulary, comprehension, use of complex text for both reading and writing, and time for student practice, practice, practice during the school day.
- It is essential that our Reading Specialists and classroom educators be a part of any curriculum changes. DESE and M.A.S.S. leaders have begun meeting as a Literacy Steering Committee to work together on solutions to building a high quality comprehensive approach to teaching reading. This Literacy Steering Committee is in addition to the DESE/Literacy Leaders Network that meets multiple times per year. Support and empower these groups in their work and their recommendations; this will ensure that solutions are emerging from the literacy experts in the field doing the work with each and every student.
- This legislation may help to provide equal access to foundational literacy skills through HQIMs and EBMs for all socio-economic and geographically located school districts. However, we are cautious when standardizing instruction.
 - Standardization may lead to a one-size-fits- all resources and method of instruction leading to disengagement and student frustration; this legislation must ensure flexibility for differentiation to meet diverse student small group and individual student needs and learning.
 - Standardization may lead to limiting curricula experiences, in particular in science and social studies.

- Cost - there will be a need for additional funding in districts and schools, in particular in our non-Student Opportunity Act (SOA) districts and districts who receive little state or federal funding. The costs for this mandated use of specific curriculum tools need to be calculated on a five-year rollout plan with decreasing amounts in each subsequent year as the work is embedded.
- Expect and hold accountable Higher Education for teacher preparation programs that adhere to training all future teachers in science-backed approaches to teaching reading.
- Have DESE focus on training current educators through their highly successful *Literacy Academies*.
 - Focus training during the summer months, not during school days as this legislation suggests.
 - Provide grants to compensate teachers for attending training sessions during the summer months.
 - Support and incentivize with grant funding, training for school and district leadership teams to develop capacity and longevity with systems and practices to implement effective literacy instruction, assessments and curricula through the *Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS)*.
 - Provide micro-credentials/endorsement of teachers, paraprofessionals, and retirees trained in science-backed approaches to teaching reading; this will provide instructional capacity in schools at every tier of MTSS including the need for some students to have small groups or 1:1 intervention.
- Districts and schools need access to High Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs) and Evidence Based Methods (EBMs). What constitutes and who determines what HQIMs and EBMs is a concern.
 - The current use of DESE's CURATE tool needs to be improved by addressing areas of weakness including 1) foundational skills programs such as phonics are not reviewed by CURATE and should be; 2) review more programs and curricula by structuring an open invitation with minimum eligibility criteria; 3) review more programs that meet both cultural and linguistic student needs; 4) require conflict of interest notifications and financial disclosures from publishers of materials reviewed; 5) add to the CURATE, process metrics for measuring efficacy of programs when implemented (e.g. correlation between MCAS scores, literacy screeners, and use of each HQIM); and, 6) consider using established and credible review tools like The Reading League which has *Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (CEGs)*.
- A separate literacy plan required as part of this legislation is redundant. Rather, require a literacy goal be a part of each District and School Strategic Plan which is already in statute. To have multiple plans may lead to no plan being successful in a district or school, and will lead to educators and leaders spending time on mandated reports rather than on student learning and progress.
 - Having DESE provide a template for a District and School Literacy Goal for strategic plans is appropriate and a support.
 - Additionally, the requirement for DESE to review and provide feedback on over 351 plans is unrealistic with their current staffing levels. Rather, we suggest Districts In Need of Assistance have DESE review their literacy goals in the district and school plans and provide feedback as is already in practice and part of DESE oversight.

We recognize the urgency of this issue and we are available for additional conversations so that every child in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is a proficient reader moving forward.

