



February 7, 2024

Dear Chairman McCrory, Chairman Currey, Senator Berthel, and Representative McCarty,

Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK) writes to make clear that the effective implementation of the Right to Read legislation is a critical special education issue. Specific Learning Disability is, by far, the largest category of students eligible for special education services. These students, by and large, need to be taught to read. The instruction needs to be systematic and based on the Science of Reading. Providing such instruction in a self-contained setting only for special education students runs counter to the legal requirement for least restrictive environment. Further, it deprives other students of the benefits of a scientifically based reading program.

Let's look at Darien, one of the loudest voices proposing gutting the Right to Read requirements. For the 2022-23 school year, 19.6% of all students and 34.8% of high needs students did not meet benchmark on ELA performance. That means that 921 Darien students failed to reach the proficiency standard. Of those 921 students, 335 were high needs students. In Darien, 91.6% of high needs students are students with IEPs. These are hardly data to brag about. In a town as wealthy as Darien, the fact that only one in five students cannot read at grade level is likely due to factors other than the quality of reading instruction in Darien schools: factors such as private tutoring and highly literate parents. The State Department of Education found Darien' reading curriculum deficient in rapid naming, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Further, "District provided a scope and sequence listing which programs will be used each week. There was no documentation demonstrating the coordination of the same terminology, routines, procedures, explicit transfer of skills from one program to another."

Southington is another district clamoring for a change in the law. For the 2022-23 school year, 29.6% of all students and 39% of high needs students did not meet benchmark on ELA performance. That means that 1,860 Southington students failed to reach the proficiency standard. Of those 1860 students, 845 were high needs students. In Southington, 47% of high needs students are students with IEPs. Again, these are hardly laudable figures. Southington's reading curriculum failed to address each of the five elements of the Science of Reading. In the meeting with the district, the State Department of Education noted, "When the district initially submitted the waiver, they were in the mode of defending a curriculum and an approach that they believed was best for students."

They have been appreciative of the waiver process because had they applied for grant money without going through this process, they probably would have purchased different programs than the ones they now feel are best for their students. Today, they are in the position of needing to defend a curriculum that they are no longer sure works best for their students. As such, they have been reviewing the Teachers College Phonics program and their eyes are now open to the gaps.”

Our purpose is not to pick on Darien or Southington. Much the same could be said about the other districts lobbying to change the law. The specific Connecticut Approved K-3 Reading Curriculum Models or Programs are not all perfect and purchasing them will involve costs to school districts. In our view, the cost is a reasonable and appropriate investment in a literate society. The specific programs are far better and far more based on the Science of Reading than the eclectic mix of programs used by many of the districts seeking legislative relief. We certainly support districts developing comprehensive structured literacy programs, with a scope and sequence to ensure that students learn literacy skills in the way research tells us works best. Until such programs are designed and vetted, however, the Reading Curriculum Models or Programs approved by the Connecticut State Department of Education need to be used.

For these reasons, SEEK opposes any legislation to undermine C.G.S. §10-14hh, Implementation of reading curriculum model or program in grades prekindergarten to three.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Flanders", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John Flanders
President