

**Written testimony of Jaclyn Galbally, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Special Education at Saint Joseph's University, before the Pennsylvania House Appropriations and Education Committees
Tuesday, October 24, 2023**

Chairman Harris, Chairman Grove, Chairman Schweyer, and Chairman Topper:

Good afternoon. I stand before you today as an advocate for comprehensive funding of kindergarten through 12th-grade structured literacy initiatives. These initiatives encompass early language and literacy screening, teacher and leader training and coaching, robust data systems, family collaboration, evidenced-aligned curriculum, and multi-tiered intervention - essential educational infrastructure currently lacking in many districts across our Commonwealth.

I am Jaclyn Galbally, an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Saint Joseph's University. I lead the Structured Literacy Programming and the Literacy Interventionist Certificate, where I have trained over 1,000 teachers. Language and Literacy have been my personal and professional focus for the past 20 years. Most recently, my colleague Nancy Scharff and I [piloted the Dynamic Early Literacy Framework \(DELF\)](#) to guide the process of making meaningful structured literacy change within a K-3 school system in Philadelphia. The DELF was born from our work and will inform my testimony today.

I began my career in Washington, D.C., earning my Master's in Special Education specializing in Learning Disabilities. As part of my graduate programming, I completed a year-long residency, a model that still influences me. Upon moving to Philadelphia, I became a founding teacher at AIM Academy, a private school for students with language-based learning disabilities and a renowned school and literacy research institute today. While working at AIM, I earned my Ph.D. at Temple University and completed my doctoral research on pre-service teacher candidates' literacy knowledge and beliefs during their student teaching. I completed an interdisciplinary fellowship for students with Neurodevelopmental disabilities and established two structured literacy teacher residency programs. During this time, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) released its [Knowledge and Practice standards](#), a set of competencies based on the extensive multidisciplinary body of evidence now known as the Science of Reading. I led SJU to be one of the first ten institutions nationwide to earn IDA accreditation.

My husband and I started our family, having three sons. When it came time for my sons to begin kindergarten, I naively believed that the expected ten-year research-to-practice gap had long passed and that my children would see the benefit of the research I taught at the graduate level.

Sadly, I was grossly and naively mistaken about the state of literacy instruction in our schools. This realization culminated as my middle son, Brady, showed early signs of language difficulties and was slow to recognize letters and associate sounds. Brady did not qualify for any intervention despite his preschool and I voicing specific concerns. When he approached kindergarten, I attempted to collaborate with our high-performing, well-resourced school district full of experienced, well-intentioned educators. However, even with my Ph.D. and relevant teaching experience, I could not access the critical elements of evidence-based instructional practice that Brady needed to become a successful reader and writer. This experience was a pivotal event that foregrounded the nature of literacy as a civil right that should be afforded to everyone and reignited my passion for teacher education and, specifically, structured literacy teacher education.

What Is Structured Literacy?

Structured literacy is not a philosophy, a fad, or yet another pendulum swing of educational reform but an instructional model built out of extensive cross-disciplinary research that respects the cognitive processes of skilled reading (Castles et al., 2018). Unfortunately, and inaccurately, Structured Literacy often gets reduced in discourse to scripted kill-and-drill phonics that eviscerate the joy of reading.

In truth, Structured Literacy recognizes that learning to read and write is not innate. For roughly 60% of the population, proficient reading and writing will **only** develop with explicit and systematic instruction (Lyon, 1998). Structured Literacy acknowledges the contribution of various linguistic domains, including phonology, orthography, morphology, semantics, syntax, background knowledge, comprehension, and written expression (IDA, 2019). Each of us has our unique blend of these linguistic domains that interact with the environmental landscapes that we live in.

Structured Literacy utilizes sequential, systematic, and explicit instructional practices, regarded as key high-leverage practices for inclusive classrooms. Structured Literacy recognizes that the human brain has a finite capacity for processing information and that foundational literacy skills must develop for more complex skills to emerge robustly. As I explain to my students, remember when you first learned to drive with your anxiety-saddled family member in the passenger seat. Initially, considering which way to push the spindle for a left turn signal or the precise pressure to apply to the break when approaching a traffic light took conscious energy. But over time, this became more fluid and increasingly less conscious. Now, you can follow GPS while singing a song and thinking about what you plan to make for dinner - all more complex tasks requiring creativity, sequencing, and coordination, amongst other skills. The same applies to foundational literacy skills such as rapidly recognizing and associating letter patterns with sounds and accurately blending those sounds to create a word we recognize from our spoken language. What

structured literacy does **not** dictate that children cannot or should not engage critically with text or playfully engage in prose.

Without structured literacy training for all teachers and instruction for all students, our current national reading proficiency rates are poor. Roughly 65% of fourth and eighth-grade readers fall for “at Basic” or “Below Basic” reading levels (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019, 2022). We have an acute mental health crisis impacting our students and a profession in despair, with nationwide teacher shortages and historically low morale in schools. We have teacher educators, educational leaders, principals, and teachers pouring their time and energy into serving increasingly diverse needs. Though these educators have worked tirelessly, they were not given the literacy knowledge, resources, and tools to meet their students where they are. We owe it to everyone to make a change now.

Let me be clear: instituting structured literacy approaches across the Commonwealth will be complicated and time-consuming. Legislators, educators, and families must come together. Structured Literacy is predicated on functional MTSS systems and robust cultures of data-based decision-making that recognize and leverage strengths to foster areas for growth in the pursuit of cultivating a cognitively capable independent learner (Hammond, 2014).

While the work will be complex, we can leverage the tremendous cross-disciplinary research that has identified key elements of change and practices to foster successful change initiatives. We can benefit from the applied sciences of improvement and implementation science that acknowledge the complex landscapes in which these reforms will occur. We can learn from other states, such as Mississippi, that have enacted reforms that have positively impacted student outcomes.

Pennsylvania shifted to Structured Literacy on April 22, 2022, when Chapter 49 was amended to include the Structured Literacy Competencies for pre-service and in-service educators aligned to the IDA Knowledge and Practice Standards. While this change is promising, much more than an unfunded training mandate is necessary to ensure all Commonwealth students become literate citizens.

What is Needed: Commitment, Collaboration, Coherent and Consistent Change Initiatives, and Communication

As mentioned earlier, my colleague Nancy Scharff and I developed and piloted a framework for schools committed to structured literacy reform. This framework identifies seven drivers that will serve as enabling contexts, fostering successful implementation efforts or unwieldy obstacles that will compete, derail, or diminish reform initiatives. These drivers include Leadership and Culture, Assessment, Curricula, Evidence-based Differentiated Instruction,

Supervision and Evaluation, Professional Development, and Family and Community Engagement. Commitment, Collaboration, Communication, and Coherent Change Initiatives addressing all seven DELF drivers are needed to successfully implement Structured Literacy reform initiatives.

Commitment

We need a sustained commitment to change initiatives that will be complex and difficult. There are no silver bullets, such as adopting a new curriculum or enrolling faculty in content knowledge professional development, which will result in sustained and effective change.

First, we need a commitment to legislation that will define a list of **evidenced-based structured literacy curricula** so teachers are not left to search for tools to meet the needs of their students, school leaders are not tasked with making uninformed curricular decisions, and more tax-payer money is not spent on misaligned resources. We need **valid universal screening measures conducted within the first 30 days** of school and **mandated, transparent reporting** to the state and families to ensure we uphold what every Pennsylvania child needs and deserves and what research shows is effective (Petscher et al., 2019; Phillips & Lonigan, 2005;).

And critically, we need commitment to **adequate funding** to *finally* provide our teachers, principals, schools, and ultimately our students with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need to be effective (Coburn & Turner, 2011).

Collaboration

Each school is a microcosm, and no one playbook will meet the needs of all students. **School teams must collaboratively engage in recursive planning, doing, studying, and acting cycles** to chart what will work for their unique school. Starting small and establishing proof of concept must occur so teachers and leaders can learn how structured literacy models work and what is needed for expansion.

We must acknowledge that we must **simultaneously build capacity for this change across multiple sectors**. Universities and schools must work together to address the short-term needs of today's students while carefully planning for future improvement. While we build capacity in all sectors, innovative partnerships such as the City University of New York's (CUNY) high-dosage tutoring models that SJU is replicating provide pre-service teachers with needed experience, implementing structured literacy instruction for prolonged duration under knowledgeable supervision. At the same time, elementary students get 1:1 tutoring using an evidenced-based structured literacy curriculum (Pace Miles & Fletcher, 2023).

Coherence and Consistent Change Initiatives

Coherent, consistent change initiatives with synergistically aligned goals, strategies, policies, resources, and instructional practices are central to successfully implementing structured literacy

reforms. We need a **licensure examination** that holds all teacher preparation programs to the same high bar of accountability.

Most critically, schools must develop coherent assessment portfolios with valid and reliable universal screening and progress monitoring tools, foster robust cultures of data-based decision-making, and align evidenced-based curricula at multiple tiers. When schools have coherent assessment tools, procedures, and curricula, teachers have a clear idea of what needs to be taught, to whom, and when leading all students, including special education and English language learners, to success.

Coherent educational infrastructure will provide enabling contexts for structured literacy-aligned models to flourish (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996). These contexts will include stable, competent, and engaged leadership that will provide the latitude for teachers and leaders to get out of their comfort zones and try new instructional practices or utilize new assessment procedures.


Communication

These reforms will take years. Timely, clear communication for all stakeholders, including families, is needed. Since improvement in literacy achievement will be predicated on such complex and granular change, identifying clear, measurable objectives with timelines and oversight will be needed. Schools and districts must engage all stakeholders and communicate progress as the reform initiatives evolve.

We must utilize early screening, communicate risk for later reading difficulty, and rapidly implement evidence-based instructional interventions tailored to the unique profiles' strengths and areas for growth. Risk identification and progress must be transparently communicated to the state, communities, and families in an accessible way.

Thank you for your time and attention to discussions of improving literacy across our state. Before I leave, I want to inform you that these changes I discussed are not happening in MOST districts across the Commonwealth, including high-performing ones like the one my son Brady could have attended. Without your attention and support, literacy change will not occur.

Literacy is not a partisan issue but a fundamental right and a cornerstone of our democracy. When we invest in literacy, we invest in the potential of every child, regardless of their background or circumstances. Thank you for your time and consideration. I implore you to make the right choice for our children, communities, and future. The time for literacy reform is now.



Jaelyn Galbally Ph.D.
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