



CUMBERLAND VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

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October 24, 2023

Good Afternoon Chairmen Harris, Grove, Schweyer, and Topper:

It is my honor to speak before the Joint Hearing of the House Education and Appropriations Committees, and I thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony to all of you today. My name is Greg Milbrand and I serve as the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education in the Cumberland Valley School District. We remain one of the most progressive, and fastest-growing school systems in the Commonwealth, housing over 10,000 students. I stand before you with a distinct passion for the effective implementation of structured literacy practices grounded in the Science of Reading. Personally, I bring a distinct expertise in large-scale change management, and the knowledge of the requirements necessary to implement structured literacy practices in a public school system.

In the spring of 2019, our district embarked on a journey to shift instruction from balanced literacy to structured literacy within our District. A guiding coalition of teachers, administrators, reading specialists, and other stakeholders came together to create a shared vision that *through the use of evidence-aligned, equitable instruction, all students will become skilled readers*. As a district entrenched deep in balanced literacy at the time, this group made a commitment to advocate to, and educate other administrators, teachers and colleagues on the importance of explicit, sequential instruction in a structured literacy model.

We emphasize the critical importance of school districts making the shift, as structured literacy is not just another educational trend, but a methodology grounded in decades of research and understanding of how the human brain learns to read. The human brain was never meant to read. Our brains are wired for oral language. Neural connections need to be created and developed for an individual to make sense of the squiggles on a page. Structured literacy is an instructional approach that benefits all learners. Structured literacy equips teachers with knowledge, tools, and strategies to target the needs of every student, including those with dyslexia. Explicit, systematic, multi-sensory instruction grounded in science benefits all! As Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." This Maya Angelou quote was the mantra of the #CVLiteracy work with administrators and professional staff, many of whom were veteran teachers and felt they had let down students in teaching them to read in a three-cueing, leveled book, whole language system. This is our urgency. This is our why. We stand behind House Bill 998, as well as Senate Bill 801. We firmly believe that structured literacy practices should be required for all teachers, impacting all students across Pennsylvania.

While the Cumberland Valley journey has reached the sustainability stages of change management, we realize many others are just beginning to navigate this process. Throughout this journey we experienced many highs and lows, moments of uncertainty, and various celebrations along the way. In an effort to navigate this change, we regularly advise districts to focus on the process, use grassroots advocacy efforts, provide proper professional development, and eventually purchase a high-quality instructional resource grounded in the Science of Reading. As with any mandate, there comes an

inherent cost associated with making this shift in instruction. While we advocate for the passing of legislation, we also strongly advise the subsequent flow of funding to support such initiatives.

The Cumberland Valley School District was very fortunate to begin this journey in 2019. We were truly ahead of the curve. Luckily, we were able to capitalize on the ARP/ESSER funding to assist with the heavy lift of implementing a new reading approach and the purchase of curricular resource. The first critical step in generating change is to provide robust professional development. It is imperative to have all stakeholders in the organization speaking the same language. This includes our teachers, Board members, and maybe most importantly, our leadership teams who will champion the effort. In partnership with the Capital Area Intermediate Unit, Pattan, The AIM Institute, and other organizations we were able to provide excellent professional development for our team. Through a shared knowledge and deeper understanding of Structured Literacy, the ship slowly began to change course as teachers transitioned from guided reading groups, to skill based small group instruction, from word walls to sound walls, and Developmental Reading Assessments to Oral Reading Fluency Assessments. As codified in the recent legislative changes, and Chapter 49, teacher preparation programs must begin to also make the shift from balanced literacy to structured literacy.

Once teachers and administrators are armed with the knowledge of effective structured literacy practices, grounded in the Science of Reading, they will crave high-quality instructional materials. While there are various programs available, the Cumberland Valley School District adopted a consistent Core Reading and Literacy program, Amplify CKLA, to provide a consistent and equitable core learning experience for all students. These efforts, combined with the use of data to inform targeted skill groups during a SOAR intervention block, have early data showing growth with our most struggling learners and significant gains in closing post-covid learning gaps. The purchase of a new, high-quality, evidence-based program is one of the major curricular expenses a district can undertake.

In closing, let us remember that education is not just about imparting knowledge; it is about empowering teachers and individuals to reach their full potential. Embracing structured literacy is not just a choice; it is a responsibility we owe to our children and the future of our society. Together, let us ensure that all students *become skilled readers*, regardless of their background or learning profile, have equitable access to a high-quality literacy education and pave the way for a brighter, more literate future for all. I humbly thank you for this opportunity to present to all of you. I will be happy to answer any questions for you.