



**A DIVERSE UNION
of EDUCATION
WORKERS**

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Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Education,

We write to you on behalf of the 117,000 members of the Massachusetts Teachers Association to express our strong opposition to S.338, *An Act promoting high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction in all Massachusetts schools* and H.698, *An Act to promote high-quality early literacy instruction and improve student outcomes*. This legislation provides the wrong path forward in the vital work of supporting and strengthening reading and literacy skills among Massachusetts students.

We as educators know firsthand how crucial reading and literacy skills are to student success in the classroom and beyond. We are always working to improve our practices, identify ways to address existing gaps and more effectively reach all our students. The reading specialists and other educators who are doing this work on a daily basis have been clear that what they need is more time, funding and flexibility to analyze student needs and respond appropriately. It is also essential that local school districts are adequately staffed and funded and that they are not restricted from implementing effective and differentiated practices. That is why the Massachusetts Teachers Association and educators across Massachusetts have been supportive of elements of the Commonwealth's Literacy Launch grant program.

Much of Literacy Launch aligns with what educators have been asking for to support their work in the classroom. It supports what school districts are already doing to implement proactive and holistic strategies that address existing gaps in reading and literacy skills by promising more state resources to purchase high-quality curriculum materials and support professional development. The MTA looks forward to working with the Legislature to build on and improve this and other existing programs. It is critical that the Commonwealth shift away from encouraging the use of privately-operated virtual learning entities to provide high-dosage tutoring under Literacy Launch and other initiatives. It is essential to student success that they receive high-quality reading and literacy instruction from experienced educators who are working in their public school district and understand their unique needs.

In addition, educators continue to urge action to address the larger funding crisis in public education that threatens to undermine student success through the elimination of essential staff and programs. Look across the state and you will see an alarming picture of districts having lost or being at risk of losing the very staff whose focus is on supporting their learning, including in the area of literacy. Sadly, this most recent round of cuts appears to be worsening a trend that actually predates the current fiscal crisis in many districts. According to an MTA analysis of data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, many districts have seen reductions, in some instances very significant reductions, in the number of reading teachers over the past decade or more. Students cannot thrive if they lose access to the reading specialists, classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, librarians, English as a second language teachers and special education teachers who provide them with instruction, interventions and accelerated learning opportunities. Taking action to support reading and literacy development means ensuring that every school district has the resources and staffing levels needed to provide a high-quality public education for every student and that is one area where we must direct our collective focus.



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By contrast, S.338/H.698 does not provide more funding to public schools or support the hiring of literacy and reading specialists, librarians or other classroom educators who directly support student learning. Instead, this legislation would create a statutory definition of “evidence-based literacy instruction” and limit school districts to using only curricula that is aligned to a problematic and restrictive definition. Placing into statute a definition that dictates specific classroom instruction is incredibly shortsighted given that research and best practices in education are not static. School districts and educators need flexibility to adapt curriculum and instruction as students’ needs change and as new evidence and research become available. In addition, the specific definition used misrepresents the components of reading instruction as if they are exhaustive and universally applicable to all students. Its emphasis on a limited set of instructional practices ignores other key components of high-quality literacy instruction and our educators’ professional expertise in designing teaching and learning.

As just one example, this legislation seeks to prohibit activities, lesson plans or curricula that have any inclusion of “picture cues” – something that could be one part of a holistic and effective instructional approach for certain students, particularly English learners. While “evidence-based literacy instruction” emphasizes a limited set of skills like phonics and phonemic awareness, educators understand that students require much more to become proficient, engaged readers and that not all students learn in the same manner. That is why legislating in a specific manner how educators must teach and how students must learn, as this bill proposes, is so deeply concerning. It misses the mark on what is needed to bring high-quality instruction to all of our classrooms and could actively deny students access to the instruction that could most effectively help them.

Again, we urge you to reject S.338 and H.698, as well as H.669, *An Act relative to teacher preparation and student literacy*, which we also oppose due to its similar, one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction. We and our MTA staff are available to meet with you to discuss this legislation in greater detail and to answer any questions you may have. We also encourage you to speak with active reading and literacy specialists working in public schools in your district.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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