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Members of the Assembly Education Committee

Re: OPPOSITION TO SB 614 (Senator Rubio)

Dear Chair O'Donnell, Vice Chair Kiley, and Members of the Education Committee:

The California Association for Parent-Child Advocacy is an all-volunteer organization engaging in legislative and policy advocacy on matters of concern to students with disabilities in California. Our members—who include parents of children with disabilities, professionals who evaluate and teach children with disabilities, and advocates and attorneys who represent them in the struggle to obtain an appropriate education—insist that our state and school districts must ensure that all students, including all students with disabilities at all levels, learn to read with fluency and comprehension. SB 614 is a frightening threat to that goal, and we strongly oppose it.

During a time of national crisis when it is impossible for parents and students to appear before this committee, it is unconscionable to permit this bill to move forward: It should be totally rejected. Before it was gutted and amended, it provided beneficial supports for preschool students. Now, it attempts to permit California to abandon all research-based reading instruction for all students, including those with disabilities. Before you could even think about radically changing California's approach to reading instruction *you would have to hear from:*

- Teens and young adults with autism and intellectual disabilities who read fluently, with comprehension, for education and pleasure, because they received standard scientific research-based reading instruction rather than the variants that special educators have often preferred;
- Students who were placed in special education wrongly because they were “instructional casualties” of approaches to literacy, like those promoted by this bill, that do not explicitly teach the reading code that students must either intuit or be taught by someone, publicly or privately. Disproportional representation of students of color in special education classes, where they face lower expectations and are presented with far fewer opportunities to learn, has varied roots, but one of the most common paths occurs when students who receive poor reading and writing instruction become unsuccessful, and often uncooperative, in activities that require those skills they have not been taught;
- Families of students with dyslexia and other children who learned to read because they received specific instruction to hear sounds within words (i.e., to develop

- phonemic awareness)—research-based instruction that is discounted by this bill.
- Parents who cannot afford to supplement poor reading instruction with Sylvan or even Hooked on Phonics, and parents who lack Internet connections to access free phonics learning materials;
 - Experts in the science of reading instruction, many of whom tried to quash this bill last summer and would presumably be very willing to weigh in now. In the meantime, please read—

Louisa Moats' piece for the AFT:

<https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/teaching-reading-is-rocket-science-2020.pdf>

Zig Engelmann's *Teaching Needy Kids in our Backward System*:

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/teaching-needy-kids-in-our-backward-system-siegfried-engelmann/1122018547?ean=2940151332699>

Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*:

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/other-peoples-children-lisa-delpit/1100623317?ean=9781595580740&aug=1>

Basic reading and writing skills are foundational. There is no substitute for teaching basic skills. Many students rely on the public schools to teach them, and it can, if it is willing to do so. It is simply false that research-based programs that intensively teach early language and reading skills somehow do not leave students room to imagine and create. All high-quality, research-based literacy programs contain ample opportunities for hearing, seeing and engaging with literature.

California has worked hard on bringing research-based interventions to special education, initially by way of the 1999 California Reading Initiative & Special Education: https://bartonreading.com/pdf/ca_reading_initiative.pdf. It has since recognized that some students required multisensory approaches in addition to standard components of research-based reading intervention—see California Dyslexia Guidelines from 2017: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/documents/cadyslexiaguidelines.pdf>

Three aspects of SB 614 are most troubling.

I. SB 614 would delete California's critical description of research-based reading instruction from state law.

California's current law reflects the science of reading instruction, which is clear and undisputed. To teach reading effectively a reading program must explicitly target 5 areas: (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) vocabulary development, (4) fluency development and (5) comprehension strategies. The law's description of research-based reading explicitly incorporates phonemic awareness (ability to hear individual sounds within words) and phonics (knowledge of sound-symbol associations and spelling rules). While it could be clearer on the other 3, it incorporates vocabulary and comprehension strategies in its references to oral language development; and its call for ongoing assessments would include fluency measures,

which ensure that students are learning to read with sufficient speed, automaticity and expression that they can understand what they are reading.

Since California's current statutory language was adopted, many California students have benefitted from research-based instruction, which came to be offered far more often. Programs such as Reading Mastery, Corrective Reading, Open Court and Language!, when used faithfully, have been very successful.

Many other students would have benefitted, had education schools and school districts not largely flouted the Legislature's direction. Many affluent parents have been duped by the characterization of phonics instruction as "drill and kill," to the detriment of many of their own children and even more low-income students in their jurisdictions. When affluent children struggle, their parents can supplement; not so for low-income families.

Some school districts have "adopted" sound curricula but, either immediately or after early micromanagement, dropped oversight as to whether they were being used. In special education, despite CDE's efforts to ensure that students with disabilities received the same kind of scientifically valid reading instruction as other students—if necessary with increases in time and staffing—many students have been relegated to memorizing small, minimally useful sets of sight words, or wrongly deemed incapable of learning to read. In many districts it is very difficult to identify students with dyslexia (specific learning disabilities affecting reading) because so many students cannot read, often because they are "instructional casualties" who were never provided sound early reading instruction. That is particularly likely for students of color who are likeliest to have new, inexperienced teachers who are fresh from imbibing education professors' enthusiasm for discredited whole language instruction.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education has recognized that many students need, and nearly all can benefit from, systematic reading instruction including systematic development of phonemic awareness, phonics rules, vocabulary development, fluency development (largely through practice), and development of comprehension strategies. Even Mississippi is improving reading scores. Jamaal Bowman, a NYC principal who just won a Congressional primary, agrees with the scientific consensus on reading instruction. The American Federation of Teachers has long endorsed research-based literacy programs. There is nothing "progressive" about supporting reading approaches that stratify young children into winners and losers, leave critical instruction to families, thrust some students unnecessarily into special education and elevate others dubiously into gifted programs, and harden into long-term educational tracking and disparate adult outcomes.

Whole language teachers' mistaken sense that they are on the right track is confirmed by the accomplishments of the students for whom such instruction works well, or appears to be sufficient because of outside supplementation ranging from cheap and free phonics programs to intensive parental support to costly 1:1 tutoring. Whole language also caters to adults' bias for making reading instruction fun for adults—they understandably prefer reading "interesting" books with children sprinkled with occasional phonics guidance to the systematic and intensive teaching of early decoding skills that research-based programs require. When substantial

numbers of students fail to learn, it is all too easy to blame that failure on poor motivation, lack of home support, and disabling conditions, rather than to question preferred methodologies.

II. SB 614 would eliminate the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment, which does not appear to be a significant contributor to difficulties in teacher recruitment nor is there evidence that it imposes discriminatory barriers to entry into the profession.

California has long recognized that knowing how to teach reading is a critical skill for teachers. K-3 teachers and special education teachers at all grade levels are charged with doing that during much of the day. Teachers in higher grades need to know how to identify problems and refer students for assistance when needed. Just as it is hard to imagine someone who should be driving on streets and freeways who cannot, after multiple tries if need be, pass written and driving tests, it is hard to imagine how it could benefit California students to have teachers who cannot pass a basic assessment of how to teach reading. Due to impacts of racism, some candidates may have to work harder to pass the test. It would make sense to waive testing fees for retests, or eliminate fees altogether given California's need for qualified teachers. Teachers are already expected to mentor each other and coach new teachers; they should be encouraged to help those who struggle pass this test. Our students need teachers who demonstrate an understanding of the basics of reading instruction. Give teachers the support they need to do so. Abandoning the requirement would only hurt students.

III. SB 614 would allow kindergarten special education teachers not to know how to teach reading—a devastating idea.

This bill began as an effort to increase financial support for early childhood inclusion. It would have supported students with disabilities in acquiring, through peer modelling and interaction, “performance language”—speaking and listening skills—key components in writing and reading respectively. Then, following passage, the bill abruptly morphed into the opposite—this version of SB 614 would generate long-term segregation for students with disabilities by denying them opportunities to learn the early reading skills that would make abundantly clear that they could benefit from continuing inclusion opportunities. It would allow credentialing of people to teach kindergarten who would not even be required to meet whatever future criteria may be developed for competence in reading instruction. Kindergarten, for better or worse, is now very much part of the K-12, not the early childhood education, system. Students are expected to emerge from kindergarten with substantial academic mastery, and students with disabilities who do not develop it then are hard-pressed to maintain inclusive educational placements.

SB 614 should be rejected in its entirety, or its previous contents—approved by the Senate—should be restored.

Sincerely,



Maureen Graves & Roberta Savage
CAPCA Co-Chairs