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CONTINUED OPPOSITION TO SB 614 (S. Rubio)

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From: California Association for Parent-Child Advocacy (CAPCA)

To: Members of the Assembly Education Committee

CAPCA continues to oppose SB 614, even if proposed amendments are adopted, because it would still generate unnecessary special education placements and would still deny vital instruction to both general and special education students. In specific response to the proposed amendments—

- 1) There may be a need for temporary, emergency adjustments to the RICA process in light of Covid-19; mid-pandemic is a very poor time to attempt wholesale revision of California’s approach to literacy. Most of this bill should be discussed, in a thoughtful way, when in-person discussions are possible.
- 2) While the proposed amendments re-insert some language regarding components of research-based reading instruction, it still does not contain the five key components of such instruction. It puts a few of them into a mix containing a broad variety of techniques, rather than requiring that teachers be informed of the centrality of, and taught how to apply, the most important ones. It opens the door for other approaches which are not research based. While some “print concepts” are fine and universally taught, the notions that students should rely on illustrations and even, in some versions, guess words by their shapes, are damaging. It has been very hard to get California teachers to use and apply the five key elements of reading instruction—phonemic awareness (hearing sounds within words), phonics (sound-symbol associations and rules), fluency (speed and automaticity), vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies. Opening the way to “diversify” instruction will dilute access to research-based instruction. The answer to California’s failure to adopt research-based reading instruction is not to remove the requirement that it do so, but to make it clear to institutions engaged in teacher preparation that they must impart sufficient skills.
- 3) The proposed language would continue to remove key requirements of existing law. One is the requirement that teachers learn how to use “ongoing diagnostic techniques that inform teaching and assessment.” Teachers are not teaching, no matter how much literature is enjoyed by children who come to school already reading, or get substantial help at home or from tutors, unless nonreaders learn to read. “Early intervention” for

students experiencing reading difficulties is critical, and needs to involve explicit, sequential techniques—not assorted techniques that someone thinks may be effective. “Guided practice in a clinical setting” so that students actually learn to use key instructional techniques—not merely some of those among others—is critical. Californians worked very hard to create the requirements of current law. It has worked hard to ensure that research-based interventions, including the five key aspects of instruction, are available to all students, and to support school districts in offering multisensory instruction for students with dyslexia. Getting those requirements faithfully adopted is a different story; school board members, parents and advocates have found the provisions of California law indispensable in this task. Scrapping California’s approach to literacy casually, in a unique legislative session, makes no sense, nor does the concept of the original bill, which was to throw out existing requirements and wait for something to be developed in their place.

- 4) Retaining state examinations of teacher candidates rather than outsourcing preparation entirely to public and private institutions makes sense, but the exception is so huge as to swallow that principle, at least until 2024. Students who fail the RICA would not have to work harder to master the information it tests; they would not need to retake the test even once. Instead, they could be deemed competent based on coursework. It is not clear whether this would even require additional coursework, or could be satisfied by having previously passed a course that did not leave them able to pass the RICA.
- 5) There are ways to reduce the burden of the RICA on students, such as eliminating fees, offering on-line or more frequent, outdoor, distanced administration, and ensuring that students have references to research that will assist them in acquiring necessary knowledge even if their education professors had contrary views about how to teach foundational reading.
- 6) If something needs to be done to further facilitate emergency credentials for teachers who have not yet passed the RICA, that may make sense given the pandemic’s horrible impact on teachers, aides and students. But broad consideration of California’s approach to reading need not and should not be done now, and SB 614, even with changes, would have long-ranging, devastating consequences.