

March 9, 2023

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz
Education Committee Members of the Minnesota House of Representatives
Education Committee Members of the Minnesota Senate
Commissioner Willie Jett, Minnesota Department of Education

Teaching children to read well is one of the fundamental roles of our public school system. As a state, the largest expenditure in our state's budget goes to fund our K-12 education system. Fully 40% of our state's \$52 billion budget goes to fund our schools. This is as it should be.

Given that investment and the importance of strong achievement for our students, it is fair that we ask what that investment is producing for our kids. Not just some kids, but all kids. We want to talk today about our state's struggling readers. All across this state, in houses and apartments, students and families are grappling with the fact that their children are not learning to read proficiently at school. That is a fact. For decades, standardized test scores indicate that nearly half of our children do not learn to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Half.

Who is in that half of all Minnesota students not reading? Most students who struggle with reading do not have a disability nor do they live in poverty. Just 12 of the 24 kids in a typical first grade class gain the skills they need before the end of the year. But a disproportionate number of our students of color and those receiving special education services have even lower achievement numbers. Just 2 in 10 students receiving special education services in Minnesota get the instruction they need to be a proficient reader. And just 3 in 10 of Minnesota's Black students could read proficiently by the end of third grade. Students who are not reading proficiently by fourth grade have a less than 75% chance of ever catching up.

It is true that some students in our schools are learning to read. Just not nearly enough of them. Research indicates that 95% of students can learn to read proficiently. What would it take to achieve that? Train educators in the science of reading, align curriculum and progress monitoring tools to the science of reading. Adjust our expectations and match our actions to align for student success. To maintain the status quo is to accept that half of our students will never read. Status quo means that we budget for failure – not only in our school budgets but also in our social safety nets and in our prison systems. No more.

For too long, we have funded and supported a system of education that meets the needs of only half of our students. That is unacceptable. When a system is challenged, it is not surprising that those who work within it and profit from it are defensive about suggestions to change it. But make no mistake, the system must change.

We represent Minnesota's nonprofit organizations that collectively for decades have been helping families with struggling readers engage with private services to teach their children how to read. Not only is this process wholly inequitable, it is also insufficient to meet the needs of this many students who fail to learn to read. The families we represent have heard many reasons provided by schools and others in education for why their child cannot read. They are asked: "Did you

read to your child?” “Did you have books in your home?” “Is the student motivated to learn?” “Maybe you haven’t found the right book yet to catch their interest.”

The science of how the brain learns to read (i.e., the science of reading) has been widely studied, reported on and discussed. The process of learning to read is the same for everyone – no matter your color, disability, socioeconomic status or motivation. Bypassing the teaching of foundational skills in favor of a balanced approach only meets the needs of the 50% of students who either can piece the code together on their own, or pay for private intervention to learn those skills. Children of all backgrounds need to be able to decode words before they can enjoy reading.

We know you are hearing conflicting statements about literacy. To those that come to you and are resistant to change we implore you to reject the desire to keep the course. Arguments that should no longer hold weight at the legislature include stating there is no literacy problem. This is nonsense. Some have said schools need to retain their local control of curriculum, screening and professional development. This strategy is not meeting our students’ needs. Others have said it violates academic freedom to require the science of reading be taught in our teacher preparation programs. Again, nonsense.

We do indeed have a literacy problem in our state. We are asking for you to take a leadership role and help our kids by passing clear, strong language confirming that our state is moving toward the science of reading, and using our state’s historic budget surplus to help districts move in this direction.

On behalf of all kids,



**MPS Academics
Advocacy Group**