



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AFT
AFL - CIO

To: House Education Committee

From: Maribeth Calabro, President

Date: March 17, 2026

Re: **Dyslexia Definition Alignment**

Testimony in **Support** of 2026-H 7909 (O'Brien, et al.)

Chairperson, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Maribeth Calabro, and I serve as President of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals. I also completed the University of Rhode Island's certification in the Science of Teaching Reading and Dyslexia, a program that deepened my understanding of the research-based practices that truly support struggling readers.

I am here today to express strong and unequivocal support for H-7909.

One of the most significant strengths of H-7909 is its clear, research-aligned definition of dyslexia. The bill accurately describes dyslexia as a learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both, and acknowledges that these challenges vary depending on the orthography. This is essential, because dyslexia is not uniform — it exists along a continuum of severity, and it persists even when students receive instruction that is effective for their peers.

The bill also recognizes that the causes of dyslexia are complex, involving genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development. This reflects what educators trained in the science of reading understand, lack of effort or poor teaching does not cause dyslexia. It is a neurobiological difference that requires targeted, evidence-based intervention.

H-7909 further acknowledges that underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal, and that early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow later literacy challenges. These insights align precisely with what research — and Rhode Island educators — have observed for decades.

The bill also correctly identifies the secondary consequences of dyslexia, including:

- * Reading comprehension challenges
- * Reduced reading and writing experience
- * Slower growth in vocabulary, background knowledge, and written expression
- * Impacts on overall academic achievement
- * And even effects on psychological well-being and future employment opportunities

356 SMITH STREET PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02908-3761 (401) 273-9800 FAX (401) 331-8815

• **Maribeth K. Calabro**, President • **Maria Manzi**, Executive Assistant • **Bridget McDonough**, Administrative Assistant •
• **Michael J. Mullane**, Field Representative • **James A. Parisi**, Field Representative •
• **Christopher Lambert**, Field Representative • **Jeremy Sencer**, Field Representative •
• **Sean Doyle**, Field Representative •



These consequences are not inevitable. They are preventable but only when we identify dyslexia early and provide structured, systematic, evidence-based instruction.

Through my certification at URI, I have seen firsthand how transformative it is when educators are equipped with knowledge and the right tools to meet the diverse learning needs of our students. The science of reading is not a trend, it is a robust, interdisciplinary body of research that explains how children learn to read and how to intervene when they struggle.

H-7909 reflects this science. It recognizes that language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective, and that identification and targeted instruction matter at every age. This is not only accurate — it is essential to preventing long-term academic and emotional harm.

As President of RIFTHP, I represent thousands of educators who are deeply committed to literacy success. They want to use practices grounded in evidence. They want clarity, consistency, and support. H-7909 provides exactly that.

This bill empowers teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet our students who are struggling with reading, where they are, and give them the tools and strategies they need for success.

Rhode Island cannot afford to continue with fragmented or outdated approaches to literacy. This bill brings coherence, accuracy, and scientific integrity to our statewide understanding of dyslexia and our approach to early literacy.

On behalf of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, and as an educator trained in the science of teaching reading and dyslexia, I urge you to pass H-7909. Our students deserve instruction and curriculum products rooted in research. And our state deserves a literacy system that reflects the best of what we know in the success of all students.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Rhode Island's children.