



Second Session – Forty-Third Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Social and Economic Development

Chairperson
David Pankratz
Constituency of Waverley



Vol. LXXIX No. 5 - 6 p.m., Wednesday, October 8, 2025

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ASAGWARA, Uzoma, Hon.	Union Station	NDP
BALCAEN, Wayne	Brandon West	PC
BEREZA, Jeff	Portage la Prairie	PC
BLASHKO, Tyler	Lagimodière	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian, Hon.	Keewatinook	NDP
BYRAM, Jodie	Agassiz	PC
CABLE, Renée, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
CHEN, Jennifer	Fort Richmond	NDP
COMPTON, Carla	Tuxedo	NDP
COOK, Kathleen	Roblin	PC
CORBETT, Shannon	Transcona	NDP
CROSS, Billie	Seine River	NDP
DELA CRUZ, Jelynn	Radisson	NDP
DEVGAN, JD	McPhillips	NDP
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
HIEBERT, Carrie	Morden-Winkler	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
KENNEDY, Nellie, Hon.	Assiniboia	NDP
KHAN, Obby	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
KING, Trevor	Lakeside	PC
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom, Hon.	Flin Flon	NDP
LOISELLE, Robert	St. Boniface	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya, Hon.	Notre Dame	NDP
MOROZ, Mike, Hon.	River Heights	NDP
MOSES, Jamie, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
MOYES, Mike, Hon.	Riel	NDP
NARTH, Konrad	La Vérendrye	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa, Hon.	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
OXENHAM, Logan	Kirkfield Park	NDP
PANKRATZ, David	Waverley	NDP
PERCHOTTE, Richard	Selkirk	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
ROBBINS, Colleen	Spruce Woods	PC
SALA, Adrien, Hon.	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu, Hon.	The Maples	NDP
SCHMIDT, Tracy, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
SCHOTT, Rachelle	Kildonan-River East	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SIMARD, Glen, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
SMITH, Bernadette, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
STONE, Lauren	Midland	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	Ind.
WHARTON, Jeff	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt, Hon.	Concordia	NDP
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Wednesday, October 8, 2025

TIME – 6 p.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – MLA David Pankratz (Waverley)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – MLA Jelynn Dela Cruz (Radisson)

ATTENDANCE – 6 QUORUM – 4

Members of the committee present:

Mr. Blashko, Mrs. Cook, MLAs Cross, Dela Cruz, Lagassé, Pankratz

APPEARING:

*Cindy Lamoureux, MLA for Tyndall Park
Trevor King, MLA for Lakeside
Hon. Tracy Schmidt, MLA for Rossmere*

PUBLIC PRESENTERS:

Bill 208–The Manitoba Small Business Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

Fernanda Vallejo, Latinas Manitoba

Bill 225–The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

*Jacob Dyck, private citizen
Laura Jones, private citizen
Natalie Riediger, private citizen
Ellen Gorter, Manitoba Literacy Alliance
Lois Cormier, private citizen
Kim Van Nieuw Amerongen, private citizen
Chris deBoer, private citizen
Karen Sharma, Manitoba Human Rights Commission
Carrie Wood, private citizen
Jina Pagura, private citizen
Tianna Voort, private citizen
Andrea Richardson, Ears for Life Audiology
Ron Cadez, Louis Riel School Division
Michelle Depner, private citizen
Michelle Ward, private citizen
Valdine Bjornson, Manitoba Teachers for Students with Learning Disabilities
Allison Guercio, private citizen
Fernanda Vallejo, Latinas Manitoba
Melissa McIntosh, private citizen
Andy Depner, private citizen
Colette Pancoe, private citizen*

Bill 234–The Pride Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

*Chris deBoer, private citizen
Dieth de Leon, Bahaghari Pride Manitoba
Nora Wilson, Brandon Pride*

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS:

Bill 225–The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

*Jodianna Paterson, private citizen
Cyndi Miles, private citizen
Joanne Seiff, private citizen
Carol Nixon-Pauls, private citizen
John Mearon, private citizen
Virginia Acuna Hernandez, private citizen
Ryan Wakshinski, private citizen
Ilana Schulz, private citizen
Ginny Lees, private citizen
Holly Cebrij, private citizen
Rosana Montebruno, private citizen
Suzy Martins, private citizen*

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

Bill 208–The Manitoba Small Business Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

Bill 225–The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

Bill 234–The Pride Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

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Clerk Assistant (Ms. Katerina Tefft): Good evening. Will the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development please come to order.

Before the committee can proceed with the business before it, it must elect a Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

MLA Billie Cross (Seine River): I'd like to nominate MLA Pankratz.

Clerk Assistant: MLA Pankratz has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, MLA Pankratz, will you please take the Chair.

The Chairperson: Before we continue, I'd like to inform this committee that a resignation letter from Mr. Blashko as Vice-Chairperson of this committee was received. Therefore, our next item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson.

Are there any nominations?

MLA Cross: I nominate MLA Dela Cruz

The Chairperson: Okay, MLA Dela Cruz has been nominated.

Are there any other nominations?

Hearing no other nominations, MLA Dela Cruz is elected Vice-Chairperson.

This meeting has been called to consider the following bills: Bill 208, The Manitoba Small Business Month Act; Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act; and Bill 234, The Pride Month Act.

I would like to inform all in attendance of the provisions in our rules regarding the hour of adjournment.

A standing committee meeting to consider a bill must not sit past midnight to hear public presentations or to consider clause by clause of a bill except by unanimous consent of the committee.

Written submissions from the following persons have been received and distributed to committee members. So on Bill 225, we have Jodianna Paterson, Cyndi Miles, Joanne Seiff, Carol Nixon-Pauls, John Mearon, Virginia Acuna Hernandez, Ryan Wakshinski, Ilana Schulz, Ginny Lees, Holly Cebrij, Rosana Montebruno and Suzy Martins.

Does the committee agree to have these documents appear in the Hansard transcript of this meeting? *[Agreed]*

MLA Cross: Is there leave for the committee to firstly complete public presentations and clause-by-clause consideration of bills 208 and 234 before moving on to public presentations and clause-by-clause consideration of Bill 225?

The Chairperson: Is there leave? *[Agreed]*

Okay, prior to proceeding with public presentations, I would like to advise members of the public regarding the process for speaking in committee.

In accordance with our rules, a time limit of 10 minutes has been allotted for presentations, with another five minutes allowed for questions from com-

mittee members. Questions shall not exceed 45 seconds in length, with no time limit for answers.

Questions may be addressed to presenters in the following rotation: first, the member sponsoring the bill or another member of their caucus; second, a member from each other recognized party; and third, an independent member.

If a presenter is not in attendance when their name is called, they will be dropped to the bottom of the list. If the presenter is not in attendance when their name is called the second time, they will be removed from the presenters' list.

The proceedings of our meetings are recorded in order to provide a verbatim transcript. Each time someone wishes to speak, whether it be an MLA or a presenter, I first have to say the person's name. This is the signal for the Hansard recorder to turn the mics on and off.

On the topic of determining the order of public presentations, I will note that we have in-person, out-of-town presenters registered, marked with an asterisk on the list. We also have a presenter registered to Bill 225, Jacob Dyck, who is 10 years old and has requested that he be allowed to present first to the bill.

With these considerations in mind, in what order does the committee wish to hear the presentations?

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I'm suggesting that for Bill 225, that the committee allow Jason *[phonetic]* Dyck to go first, followed by presenters with young children, followed by out-of-town presenters who are in person, followed by the list numerically for the remainder of the committee.

The Chairperson: Is there agreement? *[Agreed]*

Okay, thank you for your patience.

We will now proceed with public presentations.

Bill 208—The Manitoba Small Business Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

The Chairperson: So beginning with Bill 208, The Manitoba Small Business Month Act, we will begin with Fernanda Vallejo, from Latinas Manitoba Inc.

Please go ahead.

Fernanda Vallejo (Latinas Manitoba): Okay, hello, everyone. I hope you're doing good.

My name is Fernanda Vallejo, and I represent Latinas Manitoba, a community organization that sup-

ports immigrants, women and families through empowerment, education and entrepreneurship.

This bill is very meaningful to us. On Latinas Manitoba, we have a project called Martes de Emprendedores which is Entrepreneur Tuesdays. Every week we promote and support local small business from our community: restaurants, hand-made crafts, natural products, cleaning services and many more.

* (18:10)

It helps these business owners, or small-business owners, gain visibility, build confidence, and connect with customers in Manitoba, especially for newcomers, that they want to start their own business and it's not easy to find jobs.

This is why this bill matters. Recognizing a small businessman will not only celebrate the small-business owners but also remind us to buy local, to support the people who make our neighbourhoods stronger and more diverse.

I hope that in the future this recognition also brings more training, mentorship and future opportunities for immigrants.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Do members of the committee have any questions for the presenter?

MLA Billie Cross (Seine River): Not a question, but I want to thank you for presenting.

This is exactly why I brought this bill forward because I think we need to focus on local as much as we can. We need to support our small-business owners. My family owns small businesses. I know how incredibly hard folks work to run those small businesses and how important they are. And my hope is that this month will highlight that, give people an opportunity to really celebrate small businesses and give them an opportunity to work with the Chambers of Commerce by creating a calendar where maybe we look at a different small-business sector each day of the month.

Thank you so much.

The Chairperson: Ms. Vallejo, did you want to respond to that?

F. Vallejo: You're welcome. And also talking about immigration, small businesses, this October 15 we are celebrating the Latin American Heritage Month here at the Leg., October 15. You guys are invited—5 p.m.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much.

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): Thank you for coming and presenting tonight.

I know that a lot of newcomers to our province own and operate small businesses in Manitoba and a lot of small businesses in Manitoba employ newcomers to our province as well, so I know what an important issue it is for your community and for the business community as whole.

Thanks for coming.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Cook.

Did you want to respond to that at all?

F. Vallejo: No, thank you. Thank you for the space.

The Chairperson: Well, thank you so much for your presentation, Ms. Vallejo.

Bill 234—The Pride Month Act (Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act Amended)

The Chairperson: Moving along to Bill 234, The Pride Month Act, our first presenter will be Mr. Chris deBoer.

Hello. Please go ahead with your presentation.

Chris deBoer (Private Citizen): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. My name is Chris deBoer, and I'm here as a private citizen.

I'd like to speak just against the suggestion that we formally, as government, label June as Pride month. I respect and appreciate that we live in a pluralistic and multicultural society, not everybody's going to share the same values, et cetera.

But had the proposal been that we would designate one day in June as Pride day, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be excited about it. I wouldn't endorse it, et cetera, but I would not be here.

My concern is that we're going to declare June to be Pride month as state, and it just seems that that's over the top, given the—for example, for veterans we have Remembrance Day. You also are or have recently considered adding the RCMP memorial day type of thing—I think it was on February 1st—that's before committee at some point. We have Truth and Reconciliation; we have a day.

So my concern is that—that Pride is going to have an overemphasis, if you will, in the month of June.

My other concern is that we're going to market a lot of Pride materials to the schools, and you're going to inundate the schools with all kinds of materials to help the schools celebrate Pride month, and I would suggest that that's just going to cause continued greater division in our communities and society.

As a principal of an independent school, I continue to receive many requests to have children attend our school, and it's in part because of their concerns regarding the public education system's push of some of these issues.

So while I fully understand and appreciate that we live in this multicultural pluralistic society, while I can understand why one might celebrate Pride Day, I would ask that the committee please consider not adopting June as Pride month and consider that even in the bill itself, actually, it speaks about Pride events are political protests, right. So what you end up doing then is having a month endorsed by the state for the very purpose of political protest, and as you can well understand, protest has two sides. And so that would just drive greater division in our society.

So I would ask please, can we change the bill to have a Pride day at the most and then, perhaps, move from there.

Thank you for listening to me.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Any questions?

Mr. Tyler Blashko (Lagimodière): I just want to thank you for taking time out of your evening and making your presentation and the thought that you put into it. I really appreciate it.

I'll just provide a little context in that there's many months throughout the year that are recognized: Islamic History Month, Indigenous history month, Asian Heritage Month, so this wouldn't be an anomaly.

And I'm wondering if there's a world where Pride month would be seen as a learning opportunity and not necessarily an act of division, but an act of opportunity to learn about other cultures.

The Chairperson: Mr. deBoer, did you want to respond?

C. deBoer: I would say that's probably very true, that you would be able to share the Pride worldview, et cetera.

I would happen to be against that worldview, and so, like I said, I wouldn't be a big fan of a Pride day either, but it would be what you do with it. And my

concern is that a lot of the material, like when we have these various months, as a school, we receive a lot of material promoting and encouraging us to celebrate and to engage in that celebration.

And with certain months, like Black History Month, for example, we are quite excited to do that. Healthy living, we do a month as—or reading month we do. There are a number that we can participate in with happiness and joy.

This one is a bigger issue, of course. It comes at a worldview question and I don't think now is the time to get into all the nuances of that. But I would definitely agree with you; it certainly would be useful for learning. I guess I would argue that it might also lead to, if we disagree, can we disagree, right? And that's where I would find some struggle.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. deBoer.

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): I don't have a question. I just wanted to thank you for taking the time to come tonight and share your views.

The Chairperson: Any further questions? Okay.

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. deBoer.

I will now call on Dieth de Leon, who is joining us virtually.

Dieth de Leon (Bahaghari Pride Manitoba): Hi there, good evening—

The Chairperson: Sorry. I'm just going to have to stop you for one moment. We will need to actually see you. We can't have an avatar, unfortunately.

Are you able to turn on your video so we can see you? Perfect, thank you so much.

Did I pronounce your name correctly? My apologies. Dieth?

D. de Leon: That's okay. It's actually Dieth.

The Chairperson: Okay. I apologize.

Please proceed with your presentation.

* (18:20)

D. de Leon: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to be able to be here. I'm sure you have seen me before and you have heard me before, and I apologize for my weak voice tonight. But I'll try my best to deliver the message that I would like to deliver.

So first of all, I would like to thank our government members, MLA Blashko, MLA Cross, MLA Dela Cruz and MLA Pankratz, and also the

opposition—official opposition members, Mrs. Cook and MLA Lagassé and the other. Thank you for this opportunity once again.

So, yes, I guess I'm just going to read what I wrote. Yes, so dear committee members, all of you. As a private citizen and as the founder and the president of Bahaghari Pride Manitoba, also as an immigrant from the Philippines whose advocacy centres on decolonization, inclusivity, pre-colonial history and anti-fascism, I am expressing my strong and unequivocal support for the Bill 234, The Pride Month Act.

This legislation represents an important milestone in Manitoba's ongoing commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion. The formal recognition of Pride Month will serve as both a commemoration and a call to action, honouring the 2SLGBTQI+ community's resilience and contribution, while reaffirming our shared provincial values of respect and unity.

Manitoba has long been known for its friendliness and community spirit. These qualities have shaped our province's identity and expressing our collective sense of belonging. Supporting the Pride Month act allows us to reclaim that spirit and to continue building a province where everyone, regardless of gender identity, sexuality or background, feels welcome, valued and included.

It is a statement that we stand together as one Manitoban, united in the belief that inclusion strengthens us all.

From a decolonial and historical perspective, this bill also holds a deep significance. In precolonial Philippines, gender diverse such as the babaylan, or shaman, were respected community leaders and healers, until colonization, where Spanish colonized Philippines for 333 years.

Similarly here, on this island, in Turtle Island, in these treaty territories, two-spirit people have long held sacred roles with Indigenous nations, embodying balance and leadership.

The formal recognition of Pride Month here in our province not only celebrates today's queer identity; it also celebrates our trans collective communities, but also acknowledge and uplift the enduring presence and contribution of the two-spirit peoples, whose histories and identities are integral in our province.

Through education, dialogue and visibility, I believe that Bill 234 will promote inclusion, empathy and understanding across Manitoba's communities. Its passage will reaffirm our province, the province of

Manitoba, commitment to human rights and demonstrate that kindness, solidarity and respect remain at the heart of our collective identities.

So once again, thank you for your consideration and for your continued effort toward a more equitable and inclusive Manitoba.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much, Dieth, for that presentation.

Are there any questions?

Mr. Blashko: Hi, Dieth. So glad you could be here. Pleasant surprise.

I was just wondering if you wanted to elaborate on some of your work with Bahaghari Pride, and if you wanted to talk about how that community's kind of been formed, but also growing.

The Chairperson: Go ahead, Dieth.

D. de Leon: Thank you for that wonderful question.

Well, I am very happy to share that. Before, we don't have this group, this Bahaghari Manitoba group, here in Manitoba, and I believe we are the first in the Filipino and Asian community to have a queer space here in Manitoba, and I am happy to hear that.

So when we are started, a lot of people were happy that we were able to provide this kind of safe space for people who were, you know, a member of the Filipino 2SLGBTQI+, as well as our collective Asian community, where they can find a specific group like this. And also, I think we provide a lot of history why being a member of 2SLGBTQI+ even way before it's accepted and valued, and it is not something that we should hide, rather than—you know, instead it is something that we celebrate as a part of our identity.

And I think, as far as I observe, these kind of activities and—you know, that we provide to our community, not just in the Filipino community, it saves lives. It makes them feel that they are not alone, that there's someone out there, there is someplace out there for them.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dieth.

Are there any further questions?

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for presenting to us today. I don't have a question. I just wanted to say thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Cook.

Any further questions? Okay.

Thank you so much for your presentation today, Dieth. I appreciate you being with us.

So our next presenter will be Dr. Nora Wilson, who will also join us on Zoom.

Nora Wilson (Brandon Pride): This is not working. I apologize. For some reason my video is not turning on. Oh, that's wonderful. I apologize for no video on here. I don't know why my computer is not doing that. But I know that you have a need—

The Chairperson: Dr. Wilson, if you just hold on for one second, I'll ask for leave from the committee to see if the committee is okay with leave to allow Dr. Wilson to present without video and just audio. *[Agreed]*

So, Dr. Wilson, if you'd like to go ahead without video, you can go ahead. We'll just have your audio feed here, but we won't be able to see you.

N. Wilson: I really do appreciate your accommodation on this, everyone in the room.

Thank you very much for hearing my voice here today. I'd like to start by acknowledging that I am a transgender woman. I have been living in this province since 2014. I originally came here from the United States where I was born, and I am now a Canadian citizen.

I live in Brandon, Manitoba, where I am the chair of Brandon Pride. It is a position that they have just taken over, as recently as just this last month in September, and I am just very privileged and honoured to be here speaking with you today.

I was very happy to see that this bill was up for a vote, simply because I believe that we need to recognize Pride, that the government needs to recognize Pride every year to—just to show that they understand that it is a perpetual fight that we and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community—we are fighting this every single day, our right to exist as we are, to love who we love, to live as who we just feel in our hearts.

* (18:30)

And I think many cisgender and heterosexual people, perhaps also Mr. deBoer who spoke earlier, with all due respect, don't necessarily understand why there needs to be a Pride month to begin with, or even a Pride day. And I'd like to just simply just state some facts that—as for reasons why this is important.

Being straight has never been considered illegal, nor has being cisgender. Kids don't generally get kicked out of their home for being straight or cisgender. You don't get thrown in jail for being straight or cisgender. No one protests straight and cisgender weddings, and also those weddings have always had a right to happen and to be celebrated. People have not had to go into conversion therapy because they are straight or cisgender. People aren't experiencing the same level of violence as straight and cisgender people.

Straight and cisgender couples can go out onto the street holding hands with one another feeling safe to do so; whereas, just speaking to that one personally, if I go walking on the street with my partner in my town of Brandon, Manitoba, probably one out of five times I'll have something yelled at me from a fast-moving car, some derogatory statement yelled at me from somebody who does not approve of the kind of love that we have, simply just for holding hands.

I bring all of this up to show that Pride is an ongoing celebration, an ongoing protest, and yes, it is a protest, because every single election that rolls by, including our last provincial one, including our last federal election, including our upcoming school board trustee election happening in Brandon in the next week or so, every single one of these elections comes with the fright, the terror that the wrong kind of government could be put into power, ones that will strip away my access to medical care, my ability to love and marry someone whom I truly love and adore in my heart, my right to just be myself, a trans woman, out in public, someone who has served my community for over 11 years now as a professor at my university in Brandon University, as a volunteer for many organizations around town, as just someone who supports the local economy.

People in the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, we deserve the rights that everybody else does. We deserve the right that every straight and cisgender person has inherently. And I, quite honestly, I always find it a little insulting when my right to exist as myself, my right to love who I want to love, is called a political issue when, in reality, it is a human rights issue. And you can hate me all you want, you can hate trans people all you want, but you cannot deny my right to exist.

And when I hear people say that we should not have any kind of recognition of Pride because it's a political issue, I don't agree at all.

And, yes, we should allow kids to learn about Pride history, about 2SLGBTQIA+ history. Because that's another thing that doesn't happen to straight and cisgender people. Their history is not erased like 2SLGBTQIA+ history.

These kids who are in these schools deserve to see themselves in the reading materials that they check out from the library. They deserve to see themselves in every subject in the curriculum. They deserve to see—they deserve to have safety in their own schools. They deserve to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity. They deserve to not feel like their identity is going to be outed to parents who would not support them in their own household. They deserve to play sports that align with their gender identity.

I was never into sports myself as a kid, but I was a band kid, but—you know, for those young trans girls who sports speak to them, they should be able to do it.

So in conclusion with this, we need Pride because we need to keep growing as a society, we need to keep recognizing that other kinds of people exist in this world and that being straight and cisgender is not the default. And it's until we get to that point where we recognize that many types of people exist, Pride has to be recognized, and I appreciate the Manitoba government for having the rightful thinking to put this bill into place, for taking all of the actions that they have thus far in this NDP government, protecting my rights as a trans woman, of making my ability to change my name and change my gender designation easier. I appreciate the efforts there, and I thank you again for this particular bill.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much, Dr. Wilson.

Are there any questions?

Mr. Blashko: Thank you, Dr. Wilson, for sharing so generously with us tonight. Yes, we've all learned from your experience and we really appreciate your generosity.

I'm curious, sometimes folks think being queer or trans is like a big-city thing, where you and I and many others know that we exist everywhere. So I'm curious what your—what this bill means in a smaller centre, like Brandon, for your community.

N. Wilson: Thank you for that question.

Yes, there are more queer people in cities simply because cities tend to be more welcoming of those—of more kinds of different people and tend to have more

resources for my community, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. But you're absolutely right, we exist everywhere, and we exist in towns like Arden, Manitoba, and Souris, Manitoba, and Killarney. In all these small little towns in Westman there are queer people who are afraid to be themselves.

There are queer people who are afraid of the societal backlash. They are afraid of their familial backlash. They're afraid of being in their schools or work environment, of being themselves. And these people, seeing that their government is supporting their right to exist through recognizing Pride month and doing the other measures that have been taken, that goes a long way towards emboldening people to actually step out of their shame and self-doubt to be—to realize themselves fully as human beings.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Wilson.

Any further questions?

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Dr. Wilson. Thank you for taking the time tonight to share your story with us.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Cook.

Any further questions?

Okay, thank you so much, Dr. Wilson, for being here with us tonight.

* * *

**Bill 208—The Manitoba Small Business
Month Act (Commemoration of Days,
Weeks and Months Act Amended)**
(Continued)

The Chairperson: As previously agreed, we'll now move on to clause by clause of Bill 208.

Does the bill sponsor, the honourable member for Seine River, have an opening statement?

Go ahead, MLA Cross.

MLA Billie Cross (Seine River): I'll try and keep it short. I respect all the parents in the room. I'm a mom and a grandma, so I get it. So I'll just keep—I'll say a few words.

Small businesses are the heart of Manitoba's economy. They provide good jobs. They offer quality services and keep our communities strong and vibrant. But today our small-business owners are facing real challenges due to tariffs, trade uncertainty and global instability.

Our government believes it's our job to support and uplift small businesses, and that's why I'm so

proud to bring forward, Bill 208, the Manitoba small business act. This bill amends The Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act to proclaim the month of May each year as Manitoba small business month. To me, this isn't just a symbolic gesture. It's a way to shine a light on the people who drive our local economies: our entrepreneurs, our family-run shops, our farmers and our local makers.

* (18:40)

As a small business owner, I personally understand the heart and dedication it takes to run a business. From creating a valuable product for folks to enjoy to serving your community, a small business means so much both to the owners and to our communities.

The passing of this bill does more than just show our appreciation for small businesses. It also goes hand in hand with our government's support Manitoba, buy local campaign, which is to encourage more Manitobans to support our local businesses, to keep our money in our province and to strengthen our economy for the long term.

Small businesses make up 95 per cent of Manitoba's business sector. For every dollar spent at a small retailer, 66 cents stays right here in our local economy. That's two-thirds of every dollar going back into our communities, supporting jobs, services and families. We have more than 40,000 small businesses in our province, in agriculture, retail, health care, tourism, construction, transportation and more. Their true impact and value on Manitoba's economy is invaluable.

But I want to say that out of that—all of those small businesses, only 12 per cent of them are women-owned. That's something we can be proud of, but it's something we really, really need to build on.

So we want people to know that when they choose a local product, whether it's from Thompson, Beausejour, Steinbach or right here in Winnipeg, they're supporting their neighbours, their communities and our economy.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank the member from Seine River.

Does any other member wish to make an opening statement on Bill 208? No?

Okay, during the consideration of a bill, the enacting clause and the title are postponed until all other clauses have been considered in their proper order.

Clause 1—pass; clause 2—pass; clause 3—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill be reported.

**Bill 234—The Pride Month Act
(Commemoration of Days, Weeks
and Months Act Amended)**

(Continued)

The Chairperson: We'll now move on to clause by clause of Bill 234.

Does the bill sponsor, the honourable member for Lagimodière, have an opening statement?

Mr. Tyler Blashko (Lagimodière): It turns out I do.

The Chairperson: Please go ahead.

Mr. Blashko: Thank you, everyone.

I want to start off by thanking all those who took the time to contribute to the process of bringing this bill to this point. There were many individuals and community organizations from across the province that were involved with the consultation earlier on. And, of course, thank you to those that shared their insights and perspectives tonight at committee.

The purpose of this bill is to include June as Pride month in The Commemoration of Days, Weeks and Months Act. Everyone has the right to self-expression here in Manitoba, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Pride is a celebration of queer and trans culture, history and community that seeks to recognize and promote the dignity, equality, safety and visibility of those in the community.

This bill was always important, but the world has even evolved since its introduction earlier this session. There are governments looking to erase queer histories, remove protections and unjustly scapegoat trans folks for any number of things. Here in Manitoba, Pride celebrations in Steinbach had to be postponed because of threats.

Earlier this year, the PCs didn't show up to Winnipeg Pride. Their new leader claimed they weren't invited. Pride isn't Willy Wonka's chocolate factory; you don't need a golden ticket. You just need to genuinely show up, ready to learn, support and celebrate the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Maybe they couldn't even muster that. They also ran their last campaign on a transphobic parental rights platform and voted against including gender expression in the Human Rights Code. I say all this because we can slide backwards.

Our NDP is taking a decidedly different approach to our work. We'll always stand for the strength of our diversity and promotion of an inclusive Manitoba. We have expanded access to gender-affirming care, recognized two-spirit and trans day of visibility and are active partners with queer-led organizations across the province.

Before I finish my comments, I just want to thank the many people and organizations who are doing the work to build a better, more welcoming province for the queer and trans community.

During the consultation and throughout the summer, me and my colleagues met so many amazing educators, community leaders, youth and elders across the province doing the necessary community-building work. This bill is an important opportunity to affirm their work and underline that their provincial government stands right alongside them in building a stronger, more inclusive province.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: We thank the member for that statement.

Does any other member wish to make an opening statement on Bill 234?

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): Only to say that my colleagues and I here tonight are pleased to support this bill and would prefer not to engage in partisan attacks.

The Chairperson: Thank you for those comments.

During the consideration of a bill, the enacting clause and the title are postponed until all other clauses have been considered in their proper order.

Clause 1—pass; clause 2—pass; clause 3—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill be reported.

* * *

Bill 225—The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

The Chairperson: So, as previously agreed, we will now be hearing presentations on Bill 225.

And we will start with Mr. Jacob Dyck.

Go ahead, Mr. Dyck.

Jacob Dyck (Private Citizen): For the past—hello, my name is Jacob Dyck, and the past of, like, how difficult my life was including at school of how much that I usually—that the teachers didn't teach me right and it was hard and it was painful for me. And other

dyslexia kids are probably going through the same thing I went through, but I went to—on tutoring for two years to learn how to spell and write, and it helped. But it was really tough and it was wasting my time.

And I went to a brand-new school, Laureate Academy, to that—the teachers actually know how to teach dyslexia kids and how hard my life was, but we need to make that better because all teachers need to know how to teach dyslexia kids, ADHD kids and dysgraphia kids, because if I went through all of that and it hurt me then I definitely don't want that to happen to other kids because then that just makes me sad and I don't want that to happen.

Thanks for listening.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Dyck. And I want to thank you for really—[interjection]—so, Mr. Dyck, I want to thank you for very bravely and clearly articulating your experience with this.

Does anybody have any questions for Mr. Dyck?

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I really just want to thank you for coming out and speaking to committee tonight. Committee can be a very vulnerable place, it can be a very challenging place to be sometimes. And you're spearheading our committee this evening, Bill 225, by being brave enough and by being strong enough to come and speak first. So, thank you.

The Chairperson: Mr. Dyck, did you want to respond to the MLA?

J. Dyck: No.

The Chairperson: That's okay.

Anybody else have a question?

MLA Billie Cross (Seine River): Mr. Dyck, I would like to start by saying how impressed I am. I'm a teacher and I know hard it is for students to stand up in front of a group and speak so well. So I wanted to thank you for presenting to all of us and telling us about yourself.

* (18:50)

Could you tell us what grade you're in and how old you are?

J. Dyck: I am 10 and I'm in grade 5.

The Chairperson: Any other questions for Mr. Dyck?

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): Hi, Mr. Dyck. Thank you for coming.

I have two 10-year-olds, so I can imagine that this was a big undertaking for you and—but you certainly didn't look like it's the first time you've done this. So I don't know if it was or not, but you did a great job and it really helps us do our jobs to hear from people like you.

So thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much, Mr. Dyck.

MLA Bob Lagassé (Dawson Trail): So I wanted to say thank you, as well, because I actually went to The Laureate Academy when it first opened. So I know, your eyes got a little bigger there, and look where I'm sitting now, right?

So I understand what you went through as a kid—or as a kid now. I was also someone who had a hard time really learning and focusing on things. And I'm telling you, there's great things ahead of you.

So thank you for coming here tonight.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Lagassé.

Do you want to respond to that at all, Mr. Dyck?

J. Dyck: Well, no.

The Chairperson: That's great; that's okay.

MLA Jelynn Dela Cruz (Radisson): Thank you, Mr. Dyck.

I don't know what my fellow committee members were doing at 10 years old, but certainly not this. I want to say, you know, despite how challenging it must have been for you to find your voice and feel empowered in academia and your education, I want you to know that it's all paying off.

You're incredibly articulate, like many folks here have said tonight, and I hope that you continue using your voice so that other kids like you—the kids that'll come after you, long after you—will, you know, will benefit from your advocacy.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Dela Cruz.

Mr. Trevor King (Lakeside): Thank you, Mr. Dyck, for your presentation. It was very inspiring. You're a very inspiring young man and when I look at you and how you spoke today, as my colleague had said, there's many—very much for you in—ahead. I can picture you sitting in one of these chairs one day. So you keep using that voice of yours and saying what you feel.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA King.

Do you have any last statements, Mr. Dyck?

J. Dyck: No.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for being here tonight. *[interjection]*

So I will just advise that, as inspired as we all are—and I, myself also want to applaud—we are technically not allowed to be applauding here in committee tonight. So I will ask, just moving forward, if we could hold that back and maybe we could all put our hands in the air or something to celebrate. That works as well.

Thank you so much.

Okay, so as previously agreed, we will move on now to any presenters with children.

So we're going to start with Ms. Laura Jones.

Thank you for being here. You can please go ahead with your presentation.

Laura Jones (Private Citizen): Hello, my name is Laura Jones and I'm so thrilled to be here. I know that participating like this and helping to shape future laws is not something that people can do everywhere in the world and it's very special. And I appreciate the opportunity. I appreciate you all hearing me and I appreciate all the hard work that you're doing—all of you—to help Manitobans. So thank you very, very much.

And I'm going to start off with my aha moment, the moment that it clicked for me that I was going to have to go outside the Manitoba school system to get my kiddo the support she needed. And that's what we've done and we're doing really well, but I know this option isn't available for many families.

So it was a couple of years ago and my kids started really bothering me to go try rolled ice cream. It was like a new fad, and they're hearing about it from all their friends. And they wanted rolled ice cream so badly and their friends told them about a shop called Milksmith. I'm not sure if—okay, yes, you know what I'm talking about—so that—on Corydon. And finally after, you know, nagging me about it, eventually I said, okay, this is the Saturday. We can go to Milksmith, and you can bring some friends.

So we arrived, and it was everything that they had heard about. You know, there are pink walls; there was candy that was framed; it was totally adorable. There were countless toppings for your ice cream, a giant frozen table where artists were smushing ice cream with toppings and rolling them up and chopping them up and making them into these art pieces.

And so we got there. The kids were going bonkers, eyes open. Everyone's really jacked to try this ice cream. So we're finally there. And we went to put our stuff down at the table and then head over to order, and my younger daughter grabbed me by the hand and said—like, grabbed my hand down further, so I'd come down and I could put my ear to her mouth. And her face—you know, she had been so excited, and then it just kind of—and just white. And she said, I—we've got to go; I don't want ice cream. We have to go.

And I said, no; like, we're at the rolled ice cream. Like, we're here. Come on; let's go get your ice cream. Come on.

And yes, and she said, no, Mom. I need to go right now. And so I—you know, I asked her what was going on, and, as it turned out, she told me, like, I know I can't read the board and everyone else can. She didn't want anyone, you know, to know, because she was getting to that age.

Thank you.

So for me, that was—in that moment, it was—like, we're going for ice cream; yay. We're going with friends—even better. We're going to Milksmith—oh my gosh—and all the excitement. And then to see, in an instant, all that excitement turn into, like, fear, anxiety and a lot of shame.

And so I knew that we had to, you know, go outside of the Manitoba school system to get her the support she needed because we had—we were working; we were slogging away, but it obviously wasn't fast enough, and we were at a point where things were about to get really, really tough for her.

And having said that, we're actually located in one of the top divisions—school divisions in Manitoba. They're adopting and they're even creating a better literacy program because they see that many kids—it's not just dyslexic kids—but many kids are leaving school without the levels of literacy that they really need to flourish in life. And I know that you see this too.

I've had the opportunity to engage with members of the Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning Student Achievement and Inclusion Division, mostly after writing to you, and I feel that they've really heard me. Co-ordinator Kelly Ring-Whiklo met with me over the phone in May. We had a very long meeting. I've also had the opportunity to sit and share with—share our experience with another co-ordinator, Cheryl Beaumont, who was fantastic, because they cared

and they showed up to the Manitoba Human Rights Commission Right to Read public consultation.

And about a week ago I received another letter—or, I received a letter from Assistant Deputy Minister Janet Tomy in response to a letter that I'd written to you.

And so I appreciate that you're listening to Manitobans. I feel that you hear what I'm saying, and I know that you all want to get—that Manitoba wants to get reading right and that you all want this. And I see the government taking good steps, like introducing the universal early reading screening tools to ensure that no student is left behind. And I really, really applaud this effort, and I really want to make sure it works and that it's here to stay.

And that's why I think that passing this bill to enshrine early screening and access to support is so important. Reading shouldn't be politicized. Support for this is a fundamental right. It's a fundamental life skill, and it shouldn't sway depending on elections.

I'm so encouraged to see this recognized by the NDP and to see you working together on this private member's bill to improve and safeguard literacy screening in Manitoba for years to come.

* (19:00)

Thank you for your collaboration.

And honestly, I think this is a bill for Manitoba. It's not just a bill for kids with learning disabilities. Bill 225 will benefit so many readers in Manitoba and give them a great chance to succeed. The most recent report I could find on adult literacy, it's very outdated, it was from 2008, but it's striking and I'd be surprised if they've improved based on our experience and what I've heard from many others.

So in 2008, the consultation on adult literacy in Manitoba report submitted to Manitoba Advanced Education and Literacy explained that 40 per cent of working-aged adults had literacy scores below the minimum level to fully participate in our knowledge-based economy and society.

So with that in mind, I might actually suggest you consider changing the title of the bill from universal screening for learning disabilities to universal screening for learning difficulties, if that's something that Dyslexia Canada would recommend.

And I'd like to close with some insight that I've heard from our Premier that really resonated with me. I've heard Premier Kinew explain that education is the new buffalo: it's what will put a food—or put food on

the table and a roof overhead. And that makes a lot of sense to me. And I wonder what can education, Manitoba's buffalo, provide without a strong foundation in literacy?

Without solid literacy, I think that Manitoba's buffalo is starving, and it's time to feed the buffalo. It's time to take this positive step. Please pass Bill 225 and safeguard early screenings and access to reading and writing support. Manitoba has the opportunity to be a leader here. We could be the first province to enshrine a literacy mandate into law.

Please, please pass Bill 225.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Jones.

Cindy, do you have any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Ms. Jones, for your presentation, and especially for sharing your personal experience and story of your daughter. I believe that it's the personal experiences that really often help push legislation through, ensure that legislation does in fact get enacted in our province. So I want to thank you for sharing that with the committee here.

And I liked what you said about it's not just for the children currently in school, but it is for the future of Manitoba. We want to see Manitoba do well, to see Manitoba succeed, and in order to do that, we need our children to be educated well and we need our literacy rates to go higher. We're very, very low in comparison to other parts of the country.

And I did just want to report that, at this point, it has gone through second reading and the comments that have been shared inside of the House have been supportive of both the NDP and the PCs, so hopefully it will continue to move through positively and go through third reading and become legislation.

The Chairperson: So we'll go back to you, Ms. Jones, to respond.

And I will just remind everybody in the committee that it's a 45-second time limit to ask the question.

An Honourable Member: Sorry.

The Chairperson: Yes, that's okay.

L. Jones: I just want to say that's wonderful to hear, and, you know, we were so fortunate to have this aha moment at a young age and see such a tremendous turnaround with private support. But a lot of families don't have that moment until it's much later and they have a very different story. So I really appreciate what you're all doing.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Jones.

MLA Cross: Thank you for your presentation and sharing your personal story.

As mentioned, I'm a teacher. I'm one of seven in our caucus. I've worked in three different school divisions, I've worked as an educational assistant, I've worked as an early years teacher, a high school teacher and an itinerant teacher. I have taught in every single grade you could teach in.

I, of course, support literacy and teaching kids, and I believe that not all children—how do I word this? We have to meet children where they're at, and not every child could utilize or benefit from one single screening tool. That would be my only concern with this bill, is where it says a single screening tool. I worry about that because what if that tool doesn't help one child? Then we're missing out on that child. That would be my main worry with it.

How do you—what do you think about that?

L. Jones: That's a great concern to raise, and it's good to know your perspective, like, from having had all that teaching experience.

And, you know, things—research changes. We learn new things; we get better over time; we continue to get better. And it's possible that newer, better tools are coming out there.

I'm not an expert; I've just been trying to desperately learn about this over the past two years.

But what I'd say and what I'd recommend is that the—whoever is setting—I think that—I think it's outlined that it would be something that's approved by the Minister of Education. And I would recommend that if the Minister of Education could consult with health-allied professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, schools psychologists, et cetera, people who have the training in evidence-based instruction and evidence-based practice who could help you to decide, okay, you know, maybe this other screening method is great; maybe this one's better now; maybe this one works for the student.

But I'd say that in our experience, it's risky to leave it to—leave it open-ended to—you know, we're going to say you need to screen and then it's up to you to figure out how to do that in a best-fit way for you.

In our experience, like, my daughter was screened, and it didn't work out well for us. Eventually, we went and got a private screening, and, you know, it's very expensive. Most people can't do that.

And as it turned out, you know, the school was really well intentioned, but they didn't have the training that they needed to read what the screening said. And so they were giving us false reassurance for a long time.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Jones.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for your presentation tonight.

I'm just a parent. But I am also a legislator, and I've had the opportunity over the last few months to learn so much from other parents like you, from reading clinicians and educators, some of whom are in the room tonight, and from my colleague who introduced the bill.

And just so you know, my colleagues and I are fully supportive of this legislation, and we want to see it pass.

But thank you for coming here tonight and making your presentation.

L. Jones: Thanks. That's great to hear.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation today, Ms. Jones.

Next up, we'll have Natalie Riediger. Ms. Riediger, go ahead, please.

Natalie Riediger (Private Citizen): Thank you so much for having me today.

My name is Dr. Natalie Riediger. I'm an associate professor of public health nutrition at the University of Manitoba. But most importantly, I'm here as a parent of two children with dyslexia who were failed by Manitoba's public education system. And I'm here in support of Bill 225.

For my Ph.D. dissertation many years ago, I utilized data from two diabetes screening studies with a Manitoba First Nation community, and so I have expertise with respect to screening. And I'd like to make several points relevant to my expertise in public health and screening, as well as my experiences as a parent.

First, universal screening is a long-standing public health tool. Everyone in this room has been screened, probably a lot, probably more than you even know. Every baby in this province is screened at birth for phenylketonuria, a rare metabolic disorder. As we age, we are screened for many cancers. Sometimes screening is for diseases, but sometimes it isn't.

For example, during pregnancy, every woman is screened for Rh factor. My blood type is O Rh negative; that's not a disease. Both my babies were born Rh positive, and so I received Rh immune globulin. And this prevented me from developing antibodies against another blood type. The eradication of Rh hemolytic disease is one of Manitoba's greatest public health success stories.

Screening falls under the broader umbrella of preventive medicine. This includes vaccines, nutritional fortification policies, annual physicals and dental cleanings, among others. Universal screening is an optimal public health tool when key criteria are met.

* (19:10)

Number one: the condition should be a significant public health problem. Failing to teach a child to read is beyond damaging. The evidence supports illiteracy as a significant public health problem. The vast majority of adverse health outcomes follow an educational gradient, such that those with lower levels of education experience worse health outcomes. Educational attainment, for example, is also the strongest predictor of diet quality. To clarify, so I don't get accused of medicalization, the problem is not dyslexia. The problem is when dyslexia remains unidentified and not accommodated, resulting in a child not meeting their full potential in literacy.

A second key criteria for universal screening should be a clear, detectable early phase and benefit to early intervention. Children with dyslexia can learn to read, and the benefits of early intervention are well established. Teaching a child to read in later years takes considerably more time. It requires greater intensity and more resources than when initiated early in kindergarten. Early intervention also preserves a child's self-esteem and dignity.

A third key component of universal screening is that there must be a valid, reliable and cost-effective screening tool. There are valid screeners for reading that can identify children at risk of learning disabilities, with a high degree of sensitivity, in kindergarten. Sensitivity is a screening test ability to correctly identify true positives, in this case, kids with learning disabilities.

I became concerned about my son's language development at the age of three, only to be told by both a developmental pediatrician and speech pathologist that they had no concerns. A language-based disability like dyslexia manifests early. Importantly, screening

results will do so much more than just identify children's reading ability. Having valid data is a system game changer. The current lack of quality data in the education system is like flying blind with our children.

Finally, you only implement universal screening when there's an established evidence-based response and plan for follow-up intervention should somebody be screened positively or screened as at risk or not meeting benchmarks. In the case of screening for reading difficulties, we know there are effective evidence-based reading instructional approaches. Indeed, my kids received them, just not in the public school system. Unfortunately, this is where the rubber meets the road. Screening and communicating with parents are the easy parts. What does a school do for a child who's struggling? Currently, not much.

The much more difficult issue is the fact that Manitoba schools largely do not provide evidence-based classroom reading instruction, which will render screening less effective. Nor do many schools provide evidence-based reading interventions, which defeats the purpose of screening.

Reading Recovery is a reading program—excuse me—that's been used for over 30 years in Manitoba for grade 1 students. This program and teacher training is associated with the use of Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment kits and intervention books, which are not valid assessments.

Both my children were in Reading Recovery. Because thousands of teachers received this training in Manitoba, this instruction is also in classrooms. Reading Recovery is based on a discredited approach to teaching reading, called cueing, or three cueing. The latest research demonstrates children become worse readers when Reading Recovery is used compared to similar children who did not receive it. In other words, it's worse than doing nothing. Maybe if the system had decent data, a harmful program wouldn't have gone unchecked for three decades.

Witnessing what Reading Recovery did to my child with dyslexia has been one of the most painful experiences of my life. I don't know if we'll ever recover from Reading Recovery. Another mother whose daughter was in Reading Recovery and later diagnosed with dyslexia described to me that she felt as though her daughter was being abused.

In 2022, the landmark Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read report specifically stated that three cueing should not be used, and yet Reading

Recovery training continues to be funded in Manitoba until next year.

This response tells me everything I need to know about what the education sector thinks about children with reading disabilities and their human rights. Reading about our same experiences in that Ontario Right to Read report, and seeing how easily it was ignored, was hurtful beyond words. One doesn't need to harbour ill intent to hurt children; the absence of empathy and understanding has been enough.

The policies and narratives circulating in the education system reinforce the inferiority of children with dyslexia, their families and the instruction they need. Our kids are called stupid, slow, lazy. The truth is our kids are smart. They're working harder than anyone. Parents are told are you reading to your kids enough? Maybe they just need to find their Harry Potter. You should accept your child the way they are.

The truth is that no amount of reading to a child with dyslexia will teach them to read. A good book is not a substitute for reading instruction and reinforces that the issue is lack of motivation.

I love and accept my children. I don't accept ableism in the form of low expectations for them and harmful instruction.

The instruction our kids need is often referred to as oppressive, deficit-oriented, boring, kill and drill. I don't accept these negative characterizations.

The truth is pedagogy that produces illiterate children and harms children can't be anti-oppressive, culturally responsive or strength-based. Unfortunately, ableism precludes the very participation and democracy happening here today. How can somebody provide a written statement when no one taught you to write? It is a powerful form of social exclusion and the oppression from the education sector towards children with learning disabilities is intense.

I feel a deep responsibility as an ally in this space, as someone with an incredible amount of privilege. I'm here because of my kids, but not for them. It's too late for us, and the damage is far deeper than just years of lost reading instruction.

I'm here for other people's children and families. Every child matters. They have the right to learn to read. They have a right to be screened so their needs are recognized. Dyslexic children deserve to receive a diagnosis of a learning disability with dignity, not using the current wait-to-fail model that robs children of their self esteem and well-being.

Families deserve to feel trust in the education system. We all deserve to feel heard. Bill 225 is a very small step in that direction, but we're not done yet.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Riediger.

Any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: I'd like to thank you, Dr. Riediger, for coming out and presenting at tonight's committee and just sharing the information and the facts and the examples, and which you have. It's a lot of new information. We've been debating this legislation now for probably close to eight to 10 months in the House, and you've raised some new points this evening. So thank you for that.

I appreciate a distinction between—that dyslexia is not the problem; it's not diagnosing it, and we need to be doing better at that here in Manitoba.

I noticed you almost ran out of time, so I just wanted to make sure if there was anything else you wanted to convey you have that opportunity.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Lamoureux.

N. Riediger: I'm okay, thank you.

The Chairperson: Okay. MLA Schmidt—or Minister Schmidt—sorry.

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): Thank you, honourable Chair, and thank you very much, Dr. Riediger. It's nice to see you again. Thank you very much for taking the time to share not only your expertise with the committee, but also your personal experience. Thank you very much.

I appreciate the health lens that you put on this discussion and some of the comments you've made that—you know, I can tell you as minister there's two fundamental principles I think about when we're making any sort of policy: one is every child matters. You said that's sort of centering the best interests of the child at all of our decisions; also health in all policies is something I think about also and how education really is such an indicator for health outcomes and for quality of life for all Manitobans.

You also mentioned in your comments about that in health we screen for things that are not necessarily disease, so I wonder, in reference to Bill 225, if you have any concerns about the fact that this bill speaks specifically about learning disabilities and doesn't talk

about other learning difficulties or learning challenges, and what your comments might be in that regard.

N. Riediger: Thank you for that question, and I think rooted in every child matters, I think it doesn't matter why somebody's struggling to read; I think screening is really important at identifying those children's needs regardless of why they're struggling.

So I—like—I know there was a comment earlier about whether the title of this bill could be changed. I'm fine with either language. I think it will—screening will support children beyond those who have dyslexia.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Riediger.

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Dr. Riediger.

* (19:20)

Thank you for coming, and you touched on a lot in that presentation. And if I can paraphrase you—please correct me if I'm wrong—but screening is a first step, but we need to change the way we teach kids to read in schools.

You talked about the pitfalls of Reading Recovery and the queueing system.

Can you, in the brief time we have, talk about what we should be doing instead?

N. Riediger: Yes, we should be changing reading instruction to what's referred to as structured literacy. And that's an evidence-based approach to reading instruction and it really is aligned with a public health approach, because you want classroom instruction to be effective for the greatest number of students so you're not leaving anybody behind.

You need to get evidence-based instruction in the classroom because ideally you want to get to, like, 80 per cent of kids meeting benchmark because you—the system can't handle having many children needing tier 2, tier 3 instruction. And so having instruction in the classroom that's going to work for the greatest number of students is critical.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Riediger.

Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation.

So I don't have a list of any more presenters with children, but I do see some more little ones out there, so I'm wondering if there are folks who have small children who are planning on presenting tonight who are on the list who would like to present before I move on? No? Okay.

So now we're going to move on to in-person but out of town, living-out-of-town presenters.

So, Mrs. Tianna Voort.

Floor Comment: I'm not out of town, if there's other out of town people that need to present.

The Chairperson: Okay, Ms. Ellen Gorter.

Please go ahead with your presentation, thank you.

Ellen Gorter (Manitoba Literary Alliance): Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Ellen Gorter and I'm not here as a policy maker or an expert but as a mother, a farmer and someone who grew up with undiagnosed dyslexia. I immigrated to Manitoba as a baby, and, like many new families, my parents worked hard just to make ends meet. They trusted the schools would handle literacy and that if I worked hard and read more I'd eventually learn to read like everyone else.

But I went to school during the rollout of the whole language era, when the philosophy was that children would learn to read naturally by being surrounded by books, with little explicit teaching of phonics or decoding skills.

Ironically, my parents had grown up in a generation where phonics and sound-based instructions were still part of the reading lessons. But like many working parents, they followed the advice given to everyone at the time: read more at home.

So I did. I worked harder and harder but reading never came easily. Instead, I carried guilt from teachers, from home and from myself, believing I just wasn't trying hard enough.

Growing up undiagnosed throughout my school years, I felt isolated and ashamed. I watched other students read and write effortlessly while I stumbled and hid my confusion. No one ever screened me. No one explained that my brain simply processed language differently.

That lack of understanding shaped my entire childhood. I wasn't lazy or incapable; I was dyslexic. But the system didn't know how to recognize it, and as a result I spent years thinking I wasn't smart enough. And by high school I was struggling deeply with my mental health and self-esteem.

Fast-forward to today. I'm a mother of two. My daughter thrives in school but my brilliant, brilliant young son is dyslexic, just like me. And when he

began struggling with reading, I heard the same advice my parents did decades ago: just read more at home. And we did.

And from grade 1 to grade 4, I watched my son's confidence and self-esteem slowly crumble. Those should have been the years when a child feels secure, curious and full of self worth. And yet, even though I knew how bright and capable he was, creative, thoughtful and full of potential, the school was slowly damaging that self—of worth. He was falling through the cracks of the system, another child quietly drifting from grade to grade, misunderstood and unseen.

Eventually, we paid out of pocket for private assessment and finally received an official diagnosis. That moment was both relief and heartbreak: relief to understand and heartbreak that we could've known so much sooner. That diagnosis didn't just change my son's path; it changed mine. Suddenly, my whole childhood made sense. All those years of confusion and self-doubt weren't a reflection of my ability. They were a result of a system that didn't understand how the brain learns to read.

I sometimes grieve for my younger self, the child who could've thrived in a different learning environment with teachers who understood. Since then, I've made it my mission to change the 'tradjectorary' not just for my son but for every child in Manitoba. I've immersed myself in the science of reading, the body of research that shows exactly how children learn to read and why structured, evidence-based instruction works.

I've met with countless parents who share similar stories, families working multiple jobs, doing everything they can for their kids, but unable to afford private testing or tutoring. There's a clear pattern. Many come from hard-working, lower income backgrounds, and many of these parents themselves struggle with reading. It makes sense: dyslexia is genetics. But what's heartbreaking is that the system that failed us decades ago is still failing children today. The reality: we are still stuck in the whole-language error.

Although some school divisions in Manitoba are starting to adopt the science of reading practices, those efforts are still in their infancy. The whole-language and so-called balanced literacy approaches remain the norm in many classrooms. Teachers are doing their best, but they are under immense pressure, managing large classes, diverse needs and outdated training that never equipped them with the tools to teach reading based on brain science. It's not the teachers' fault. The system hasn't given them the knowledge or the mandate

to change. That's why this bill is so critical. It forces a shift towards data and evidence.

And by the time children are finally identified, they've already learned something devastating: that they're not good enough. But that's not true. This isn't a lack of intelligence. The reality is that about one in four children in every classroom struggle with reading or related learning differences. And when we don't screen, we don't just delay support; we erode confidence and damage self-worth. This isn't only an educational issue; it's an equality issue and a human right issue. Every child in Manitoba has a right to learn to read, and every teacher deserves the tools to make that possible. And why universal screening matters? Bill 225 ensures that every child in Manitoba's public schools is screened early and systematically for learning disabilities, or what I like to call differences.

Early detection changes lives. When kot—in kindergarten or grade 1, structured literacy and target interventions can close the gap before it grows. Universal screening promotes fairness. Every child, regardless of where they live or what their parents earn, get their fair chance to be seen and supported. Teachers gain clarity. With accurate data and training they can act early instead of reacting and families reacting late. It prevents shame and saves resources. Early intervention costs far less emotionally, financially than years of frustration and remediation. This bill isn't about more bureaucracy or testing for testing sakes. It's about opening doors and changing outcomes for entire generations of children.

We can't keep telling parents to read more when what's missing is early detection and science-based instruction. We can't keep letting kids slip through cracks because of—teachers haven't been given them the right to—haven't been given the right tools. And as a parent and as a dyslexic adult and as a Manitoban, I'm asking you to pass this bill because no child should grow up thinking they're broken when they're simply being taught in a way their brain doesn't understand.

And when I see my son read now, with pride, confidence and joy, because he works with a reading clinician outside of school hours, I am reminded of what's possible when we understand instead of overlook. But every child deserves that kind of intervention within their school day.

* (19:30)

Bill 225 will ensure that no child in Manitoba is left behind, and this is our chance to end the cycle and

give every child, regardless of background, the fundamental right to read, to learn and to thrive.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Gorter.

Any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: I'd like to just begin by thanking you for your presentation here tonight and sharing your personal experience. It's an incredible, vulnerable experience to share. But, again, I've said this before, these are the examples that really help ensure that legislation does go through and becomes legislation here in the province. And speaking of your generational story, it is so appreciated. So thank you for sharing.

My question—it's a big question; you started to touch on it, but what do you think this legislation would have done for you or for your son if it had been implemented in the schools when you needed it?

The Chairperson: Go ahead, Ms. Gorter.

E. Gorter: You're asking me if—what it would have done if I was screened? I think it would have gave me a sense of understanding of how I learned and, you know, we—there's no hiding it; there's no confusion. And I think—the other presenter touched on it. I think we could—if we use science in the classroom, more kids could learn.

And so—sorry, I'm not very good at answering questions.

The Chairperson: It's great. Thank you, Ms. Gorter.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you very much for your presentation, for sharing your experience with us and your opinions about Bill 225.

And I think I just want to say, first of all, how much I agree with so much of what you said, and that our government agrees about the need for early intervention and the need for early universal screening tools. And that's exactly why our government, in April, proceeded with a ministerial directive to make sure that school divisions across the province have the mandate from the provincial government to use evidence-based, comprehensive universal early reading screening tools. Because we believe, like you do, that that early intervention, that early diagnosis or identification, is so vitally important.

So perhaps not a question; I just wanted to express, again, my thanks for your presentation and also how much we agree with you.

Thank you so much.

The Chairperson: Did you want to respond to that, Ms. Gorter?

E. Gorter: Yes, that's great. It can't come soon enough, I think.

Mrs. Cook: Hi. Thank you so much for coming.

I don't have a specific question. I just know you've been here for a couple hours already, and we appreciate you sharing your story. It helps us do our jobs.

E. Gorter: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Any other questions?

MLA Lamoureux: I just want to put on record that I think it's important to point out that the release that came out after the legislation had been introduced speaks to some of the information in the legislation, but it does not, in fact, legislate it. So there's no real commitment; there's no follow-up, no accountability to ensure that the school divisions are, in fact, implementing two screenings a year.

It also does not commit to allowing parents to have the results of what the schools find, and it does not commit to having the school boards come up with ways and resources to then help the students who have been screened.

That's why the legislation is important.

E. Gorter: Yes, exactly. That's—those key points are super important: accountability and communication and screening and—yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Gorter.

Next up, we have Josee Adrian. In the room today? No?

Okay, we will move on to Ms. Jeanne Hudek.

Okay, Michelle Depner.

We'll try Mrs. Alicia Smith.

Ms. Angela Yaskiw.

Mr. Marko Bebek?

And Lois Cormier.

Thank you. Please go ahead with your presentation.

Lois Cormier (Private Citizen): Thank you for having us here this evening. My name is Lois Cormier, and I come to you today as a mother of an adult child with learning disabilities; a grandmother of 11, nine with disabilities; and also a retired law enforcement officer. I was a school liaison officer in a high school for eight years where I was—worked tirelessly with the youth at risk, which I found all the majority had learning disabilities when I was dealing with the youth in the schools.

But I'm here today to talk to you about the impacts that are affecting our children and families that many realize and don't realize the learning differences and dyslexia on this international dyslexia day when we're all wearing red. It's kind of unique that we're here on this day.

These are not rare challenges. They're real, lifelong differences in the way that people learn, process and express information and yet too often they go unnoticed, misunderstood or misinterpreted in classrooms that affect everyday living across our province.

The unfortunate part of the challenges that a high percentage of our youth without supports with the learning disabilities end up in our criminal justice system, within our social services, our mental health, addictions and poverty. When I was in law enforcement, my first question with youth was: how are you in school? And that determined to me what I was dealing with and where I could assist.

Focusing on their strengths, changing classes to a teacher that would be more understanding, offering tutoring, whatever could help them to be successful. Children with learning disabilities, like dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia or ADHD, are just as intelligent, capable and creative as their peers, but without the right support they can quickly fall behind, not because they can't learn but because we haven't learned how to teach them the way they need.

That's why this conversation matters. That's why we're here. We need more education and training for our teachers and educational assistants. These are the people who spend every day with our children, guiding them, shaping their confidence and helping them believe in their own potential. Yet many of them that enter the classroom are entering without the proper tools or knowledge to identify or support a child with dyslexia or other learning differences.

Imagine how powerful it would be if every teacher could recognize the signs early, if every classroom

had strategies in place to help those struggling readers thrive rather than fall through the cracks. When teachers understand learning disabilities, they don't just change lesson plans, they'll change a life.

This isn't just an education issue; it's a human issue. Every child deserves to be seen, understood and capable, and every educator deserves the training and support to make that happen.

When I ask my grandchildren what message I could relate for them—I don't want to cry—they said, please ask them to get more training for teachers and train the educational assistants so they'll learn how to teach us and how they can talk to us. We aren't lazy. We try our best, even though the teacher gives me 20 per cent. My binder and my locker are a mess, and that's how my brain functions, so try and understand me. I need time.

Don't get mad at me for sitting looking at the whiteboard, telling me to write everything when I can't even understand what is written and I don't even know where to start. Don't tell me that you know I can do it and I choose not to when I'm already trying. Don't tell me to sit in a math class for a semester, to just sit there, not do the work, I won't get a credit, but I have to sit there to get used to sitting in a math class. And if I decide to start doing some work, then maybe the school will look at giving me a credit. But that's up to me, if I want to. I want to do math, but I'm really struggling because I don't understand.

* (19:40)

So today I'm asking for a stronger awareness, better teacher education, more inclusive learning environments because when we invest in understanding learning disabilities, we invest in the future success and the well-being of every child.

I really think that education, social services, the judicial system and health—we're all dealing with the same people. So all the funding that's going out to those different—like the different areas—we're all dealing with those same people. And I would love, at one point—I don't know if it's ever been done, but I really think there needs to be a study to see how many children have gone into the justice system that are dealing with the learning disabilities as well as the adults.

I was—I did go to Europe because I wasn't getting the answers I was getting—needed in Canada, and I went to a conference in England last September and spoke to a counsellor that was in a youth jail. And she said 85 per cent of her clients had learning disabilities.

So if we could give those children and students self-confidence in the classroom, self-confidence goes a long way in life, and I think, looking at my grandchildren and other children—and I'm here from Thompson, and so I have a lot of people that have also been chirping in my ear—and the self-confidence piece that they're not gaining in the classroom or in the school is huge, and without self-confidence in life, you don't go very far.

So thank you very much for listening to me.

The Chairperson: Thanks so much, Ms. Cormier.

MLA Lamoureux: I want to—it's more of a comment than a question, but I want to thank you for your presentation and all that you've contributed to our education system over the years in your roles as your profession, as a mother, as a grandmother and for even being here tonight and continuing to speak for better education in our province.

I very much appreciate the connection to the judicial system. I think it's very important that we highlight how here in Manitoba we have some of the lowest literacy rates throughout Canada, and we know that universal screening is working well in other provinces, including Alberta, Saskatchewan more recently, New Brunswick, and by bringing legislation like this here to the province, our literacy rates can only go up, and that will, in turn, be reflected in our judicial system.

The Chairperson: Ms. Cormier, would you like to respond?

L. Cormier: Yes, I'd have to agree. You wouldn't—you can't imagine how many people can't write their names. And so I know when we're policing and you have to sign a document if you've been charged or being released, and so many Xs.

So we do have a huge issue here in Manitoba with reading and writing and other learning disabilities.

MLA Cross: Thank you for sharing your experiences as a school resource officer. Thank you for your service because I know how challenging that work can be.

One thing you said that really struck a chord with me was about confidence, talking about when students feel confident. Not only when they feel confident do they do better but they feel like they belong, and I think that's a big word that we haven't really said. Belonging is probably the biggest key to success for students. If they don't have that confidence, they don't feel like they belong with the rest of the kids. So thank you for articulating things the way that you did.

The Chairperson: Thanks, MLA Cross.

Did you want to respond to that, Ms. Cormier?

L. Cormier: I have to agree, because if they don't belong, they go find a gang to belong to, and that's unfortunately—classroom. I've seen where they've had phenomenal teachers and they've done phenomenal work with those students, and they have not made it into the judicial system, which their friends and family have. And so confidence is huge, and that builds a sense of belonging.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Cormier.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you, Ms. Cormier, for coming tonight. I think you touched on a lot of things in that presentation, but you did a really good job of articulating the risks of not screening and not intervening and the downstream effects of that. So thank you for articulating that so clearly. I don't actually have a—any further question for you, but I wanted to thank you.

The Chairperson: Any other questions?

Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Cormier. Much appreciated.

Next I have Angelina Hartwell.

Okay, next we have Kim Van Nieuw Amerongen.

Hi, there. Thanks for being here tonight. You can go ahead with your presentation.

Kim Van Nieuw Amerongen (Private Citizen): Well, hello, and good evening, all. My name is Kim Van Nieuw Amerongen, and honestly, I'm quite the ball of nerves up here right now. It might be shocking to those who know me, but I'm normally on the sidelines. I'm more of a cheerleader than the person out front. But tonight, I'm up here because it's something more important than my fear of public speaking. It's about my kids and the future.

A lot of people up here have brought up a lot of wonderful studies and information. I don't have that; I'm simply a mom. I could reference my younger brother who, even though he was caught with his learning difficulties and disabilities young, teachers didn't have the knowledge, and he is currently in the justice system as we speak.

I'm here to talk about my kids, though, as a mom. Rowan is my youngest child, and when at the age of two, his dad and I were worried about his lack of recognizable words. A quick ask at the doctor's office led us to free screening for hearing and speech issues,

and then three wonderful years of free in-home speech therapy, provided by Manitoba Possible.

Now, all in an effort to prepare him for school and the world as a whole, this speech intervention continued through school up until grade 3 where he graduated. It was something he was very proud of. I mean, as a parent, this was great. I had limited things to do; it was put in front of me, it was easy, it was great, it was what I expected. Well, once he got to school, he thrived otherwise. From kindergarten on, though, his English and French grades were coming home as ND, so not demonstrated, or one on a five-point system.

And every semester, a week or two before report cards were sent home, I would get the obligatory call from his teacher, you know, the reminder they have to tell us if the student's coming home with something less than a two, and telling me not to worry, though, that Rowan had these not developings and these ones, that he was doing great otherwise; all students come along in their own time and that, you know, he was doing great.

Well, Rowan had a really great rapport with all of his teachers in elementary school, and every one of them had all these wonderful things to say about him. But every single one of them let it slide that he could not read or write at the same level of his peers.

Year after year, the gaps got worse. No matter how many questions we asked, we were told not to worry. Yet, before every report card was issued, that call would come, advising us that he was not thriving in the specific subjects that required reading and writing, but overall was doing great. I got to say overall, though, his teachers did do great, trying to accommodate him without a diagnosis, finding ways for him to show that he had the knowledge he needed in his head; he was just unable to write it down.

This only worked because Rowan was admittedly a teacher's pet, and he loves to learn, and he shows it with every fibre of his being when he's accommodated. But providing accommodations can only go so far if you don't know what you're accommodating for.

I asked when my son struggled more than my daughter, three years his senior, at basic reading and writing since first grade. At first, it was simply 'attribulo' to every child and their own timeline. Then I started beating myself up. I mean, I was thinking that we hadn't been spending enough time with him, that simply buckling down and reading with him every

night would fix whatever this was. I was asking his teachers if I should be worried, and was I told no, no, he understands, it's fine, it'll come along with time.

Time, it did pass. When we would go to parent conferences where Rowan would show us his work, there was nothing completed. Paper after paper of written work left undone, half done or done in a way that you could not read without a cipher.

* (19:50)

The non-developings—and non-displays in the ones continued for English and French. My child coming home crying because another kid would whisper how stupid he was into his ear each time he needed help. Time, lots of time for him to feel that there is something fundamentally wrong with him, time where proper support for a disability would have made a world of difference in a young boy's self-confidence and self-worth, where a school meant to teach basic—meant to teach the basics to children could have supported his basic need to learn how to read and write.

Now, fifth grade, we're given what was referred to as a golden ticket. Now, please let me stress: Rowan's case seems to be an anomaly. Rowan had teaching staff that fell in love with him and forced the issue before middle school. They were able to have a school division psychologist complete a psychological evaluation. The result: my grade 5 child could read at the same level as a kindergarten child.

The only reason he was thriving in all subjects other than his English and French at all is because he loved to learn and found ways, using context clues, to absorb the information the text was trying to provide and was able to prove to his teachers using methods other than traditional pen and paper tests.

My son is incredibly intelligent, and it shows how much harder he's had to work than his peers to complete the same tasks. Picture somebody who needs glasses to see the white board clearly but has never been told this. All the information they need to complete their task is written on that board, but they're not allowed to get up and see the board more clearly. They can only work with what's in front of them and they see their classmates completing the same task with ease while they struggle to understand where to start. This was Rowan's reality.

While the diagnosis was a milestone as it provided a label and a rough idea for a way forward, it came at a very awkward time in Rowan's learning. A transition from early years to middle school, a new school, a new

teacher and let's not forget all the other kids' experience starting their teenage years.

At the beginning of my story, I spoke about when Rowan was two and we were concerned about his speech. The solution was so simple, and integrated into the schooling, we figured, once again, when we asked: now we know what's wrong, what do we do? I anticipated my child would be put into some sort of class especially developed for children with dyslexia to get him up to speed, or that he'd be offered additional tutoring.

To be told that nothing would be done other than to provide him with an—a tablet as an accommodation blew my mind.

In reality, where in the sixth grade curriculum, though, could you even have time to teach a child to read and write? This is a skill that should have been mastered long before now.

Rowan's middle school career has now been a constant battle back and forth between myself and the school, trying to find the best mix of technology and other resources for Rowan to be successful. Some days I feel the school's my ally; other days it feels like they're my enemy. My family is not well off. However, we did, for a time, pay out of pocket for dyslexia-specific tutoring at a cost of over \$600 a month.

The difference we saw in the short six months we were able to afford it blew my mind. If the screening could have been provided early in Rowan's school career, this kind of intervention could have been done long before now and it could have been done in the classroom to allow my son to have the same basic command of reading and writing as his peers.

And did you know they think that dyslexia has a genetic component? Don't ask to see the rough draft of the speech; I use talk to text throughout as a tool to accommodate my inability to spell, something that I was mocked and ridiculed for throughout my school career.

This also means my grandchildren could very well face the same difficulties with reading and writing my child has. Wouldn't it be a crying shame if my son has to face the same difficulties obtaining help for his children as I do for him because nobody thought it was important enough now?

Bill 225 is simply asking that we make sure each child has equal opportunity to learn and thrive, providing the basic foundation they need to function in society after school.

Please pass this bill because basic literacy is a right.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Van Nieuw Amerongen.

We will now go to questions. Are there any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: I just want to—it's more of a comment again than a question, but I do want to say that you shouldn't be on the sidelines. You're incredibly well-spoken and well articulate and I hope you consider being upfront and centre more often.

I want to thank you for speaking to how this legislation could have impacted your own child's experience in school and for sharing your personal experience and again what your family has had to go through to get to where you are today.

K. Van Nieuw Amerongen: Thank you for that.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you very much for your presentation. I didn't get to catch some of it; I had to run out. I just want to apologize to you and to the rest of the presenters and just to explain I feel very honoured and privileged to be here as the minister responsible, and I want to be able to hear everyone's presentations.

But I do have a bill amending the public schools act in the other committee room, so I just wanted to explain that to yourself and the other presenters that if I do have to leave the room, it's not because I don't find your presentations valuable and important. It's just because I do have responsibilities in another committee room.

So thank you very much, and I apologize. I know that my friends here were here listening and that the bill's sponsor here was listening, so thank you very much.

Thank you, honourable Chairperson.

K. Van Nieuw Amerongen: I'm good.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for coming.

I think you've done a really skillful job of identifying what the gaps are in a child's typical journey through the education system when we don't identify learning difficulties early on, and the ways the system, as it's currently set up, fails to support them. And that's really important for us to know, so thank you.

K. Van Nieuw Amerongen: I'm currently in—you know, a heated discussion with my school over my son's access to his tablet, and whether the classroom teacher understands the IEP that was laid out for him by the division's psychologist. And we've had the same

conversation with his teachers each year for three years.

It would be great to see training, more so alongside this bill, to make sure that the teachers actually have the skills, to make sure that these students weren't just told they're dyslexic and deal with it.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Van Nieuw Amerongen.

Mr. Tyler Blashko (Lagimodière): Hi. Just wanted to say thank you so much for your presentation. And I think I heard that your children were also learning French. So I was curious, are there particular nuances and experiences that we should know as folks considering this bill, for those people navigating learning disabilities in multiple languages?

K. Van Nieuw Amerongen: Yes. My kids both attend a French immersion school, and what it comes down to is they're going to experience these difficulties no matter which language they learn in. It's a language-processing problem, not an English language problem.

So I have been told that while my son will—you know, if we're able to afford to put him back into private tutoring, will succeed in mastering the English language. For French and other languages, he will most likely always need some sort of electronic assistance, unless a similar program is developed and he were to decide to take that course for learning how to spell in another language.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation this evening.

Next up, we have Mr. Chris deBoer.

Please proceed with your presentation.

Chris deBoer (Private Citizen): Good evening. Thank you, Chair, and committee members.

My name is Dr. Chris deBoer, an educational doctorate in organizational improvement, and I'm very excited by the initiative here to screen and to do early interventions to help our—all of our students learn. And I think that's, of course, crucial.

And I've been listening to the presentations, and they are all very personal and valuable and I've been learning a lot just being here this evening and learning from the previous presenters.

And I think what we often hear is that the—it's going to be one thing to screen and find the disability, the learning disability, assess it, diagnose it—is going to be the lion's share of the work, working with those disabilities, those challenges. This is only a first step, once the students are assessed and diagnosed. Again, a multitude of work will need to be done to help our teachers, our EAs, our resource teachers implement the necessary strategies to help all students learn.

And so this—I understand that this can only be a first step. In my school, we also have students diagnosed with dyslexia. We are doing right brain, left brain connectivity. We are doing also reading assessments in various grades. I suppose—and if I'm ignorant, I apologize—I understand why people want this bill passed. My concern with the bill is that we're assessing students eight times, if I understand the bill correctly—that we're going to assess every child from kindergarten to grade 3 eight times.

* (20:00)

We don't know what the tool is that's going to be used—earlier mentioned, can we use one tool to assess all students? I'm concerned about who's going to do the assessment. Is it a written assessment? Educational psychologists are looking not only at what a child is writing, but—not even what they're just speaking but also how they're behaving. It's a multi-faceted assessment to learn whether or not a child has a learning disability.

So I'm concerned that we're going to be asking—either we're not going to have the right people doing it, or they're not going to get the right training, or they're not going to have the right screening and that we're not going to be able to accomplish the goals that so many here, and I, myself, hope to achieve.

In our school, we do assessments of all students in kindergarten and grade 1, and we do that in the fall, then again in the spring. But after grade 1, we would do it based on teacher assessment in the classroom. As teachers recognize that students are struggling with their writing or with their mathematics, literacy or numeracy, we then do another assessment. We then come up with a plan; we then reach out to the educational psychologist, perhaps, for further assessment, et cetera.

And I think the big challenge many of us are struggling with is ADHD which—I'm not sure which definition of learning disability we're using, but not just any teacher can assess ADHD, and there's no

simple screening. You need to be an educational psychologist or a psychologist to achieve that goal.

And so while I appreciate the intent of the bill, I do think that this bill needs to be strengthened by being more carefully considered for implementation, and also whether or not, really, we need to be assessing students eight times.

So students who are in grade 2 that have a reading ability of grade 5—grade 4, grade 5, depending on the screening—if we've done this assessment, why are we assessing them again?

And just as I read the bill, there's just no exceptions. There's no—every child in kindergarten to grade 3 must be assessed eight times. And I really don't know that that's the best use of our time and resources.

Can we catch the ones that need it by assessing them early and then where there's classroom evidence, because I think that's the other thing. Maybe we're concerned that teachers are not identifying students that are struggling. Maybe there's a miscommunication between classroom teacher and resource teacher. I'm not sure where that's falling. But I'm also not sure that the solution is eight assessments of every kid, two per year, especially when we know that some of these kids are really doing very, very well and we know that they don't have a reading disability. We see that they're excelling in mathematics, then why would we insist on assessing them further.

So that would just be my concern. And I support the bill's intent. I'd just ask that you might consider amending it carefully so that you make the best use of resources as you are able.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. deBoer.

MLA Lamoureux: I want to use this opportunity to try and answer some of the questions in which you are asking here this evening.

Why do students require two screenings as opposed to one? It has been noted that students may regress in their learning, and as such, having a benchmark near the beginning of the year and the end of the year will help provide context as to whether students are on track. In addition to that, a minimum of two assessments will also ensure that those who have transferred schools throughout the year will be screened at least one time. This is especially relevant for children who are in care, newcomers and other vulnerable groups.

And why the eight times? In this case, K to 3, and it has been recommended to take it even further, to grade 4 or grade 5—this is based off much consultation, how it's practised in other—

The Chairperson: Sorry, MLA Lamoureux. We'll just have to interrupt.

We do have a 45-second time limits on questions.

Mr. deBoer, did you want to respond to what you got to hear?

C. deBoer: I appreciate the explanation.

Yes, and you kind of wish that there would be greater communication between schools so that if a child has been missed, that they would be screened in the new school.

I totally appreciate doing the best to catch all. But I wonder, again, if that's going to be the best use of resources if a child is in the same school, to be assessed eight times by law.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. deBoer, for your presentation. I wholeheartedly agree with you when you say that you agree with the spirit and intent of this law. I think that all of our committee members would agree with you in that case.

As I mentioned before, we all, I think, agree that universal early reading screeners are important. That's why our government introduced them in April. We went beyond K to 3, which this bill is asking for. We have mandated a K-to-4 screener.

We also, I think, agree on the need for some flexibility. So in our ministerial directive, what we've asked schools to do is, in K to 4, twice a year screening unless it's determined that that screening's not necessary, because we know that we ask a lot of teachers and teachers are doing a lot.

And if those two screenings a year to ensure that benchmarks are met are—

The Chairperson: Minister Schmidt, sorry, I'll have to interrupt you. The 45 seconds for the question are up.

C. deBoer: No, I appreciate that. I think that flexibility is going to be crucial to its success, otherwise, this will—I'm afraid it won't be successful.

And I also think it would be great to have a larger debate or discussion on other assessment tools that are being used, like the grade 3 assessment tool and the grade 7, because I find a lot of them a little bit—yes, not as effective as they should be or helping us achieve

goals that we might want to. But that's for a rainy day, I suppose.

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Mr. deBoer. Thank you for coming and presenting on this bill as well.

One of the features of this process is that—and it's a feature, not a bug—is that we—it gives everybody an opportunity to come and present and present their views. And I think that diversity of opinion makes for a stronger process on our end. So thank you for coming.

I don't have a question.

The Chairperson: Mr. deBoer?

C. deBoer: No, no comment. Just, yes, again appreciate the spirit of the goal, so keep it up.

MLA Lamoureux: I just want to continue with my answer: so why again screen from K to 3. Students in this grade level have very malleable brains. They are primed for learning, to read during this time, as it is at the most critical time to, in fact, intervene. That's why these grades were chosen.

And what does this screening actually look like, what does it entail when we compare it to other provinces? And, of course, the minister, at the end of the day, will have the final say on what the resource is, but elsewhere it is a two- to three-minute test. It is very short. It is a one-on-one conversation, often involving a teacher, an EA or other specialist identifying words and talking.

C. deBoer: That makes me more nervous; about the two- to three-minute thing, but okay.

MLA Cross: Thank you for presenting and bringing your experiences forward as someone who is in the education system. I liked a lot of what you said around assessment, as someone who has taught at all different levels.

For me—for those that don't know, there's different kinds of assessment. We have formative, we have summative. Good teachers do ongoing assessment all year long, right? All year long. We know that.

And so I'm assuming in your school that is something that's happening when you're talking about your concerns about screening and doing it so many times. Is that because you know assessment is an ongoing thing in your school?

C. deBoer: Yes, absolutely and we're—my resource teacher is talking to the classroom teachers all the time and their class sizes are about 25-ish. And, yes, we're

making sure that the teachers and the resource teacher are having those conversations. So, yes, that's correct.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. deBoer. Thank you for your presentation.

And I will just remind committee members that the 45 seconds for questions are intended for questions and not as necessarily just explanations or of further speeches. The responses can go into greater detail, if they would like.

Next, we'll have Ms. Karen Sharma.

Thank you for being here with us. You can go ahead with your presentation.

Karen Sharma (Manitoba Human Rights Commission): Thank you very much. I'm pleased to join you this evening on behalf of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission to put a few words on the record regarding Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities).

If passed, this law will ensure that all students in Manitoba's public education system are proactively screened for learning disabilities—in particular, for reading disabilities, reading difficulties or disabilities—and that this information will be shared with students, parents, guardians and families.

As you may know, the Human Rights Commission is an independent agency of the government of Manitoba, responsible for enforcing the rights and responsibilities set out in Manitoba's Human Rights Code through a complaints process and by promoting human rights through education, research and public advocacy.

* (20:10)

In 2023—you might be wondering why I'm here—so in 2023 we launched an initiative entitled Supporting the Right to Read in Manitoba, which explores the pathway to ensuring that every student in our province is able to access their fundamental right to learn to read, a right that has been recognized since 2008 by the Supreme Court of Canada in the landmark Moore decision.

This project began as, really, a result of community advocacy. The commission was approached by a group of concerned students and parents who were not receiving the supports that they needed to learn to 'rean'—read equitably in Manitoba schools. Their concerns, combined with the efforts of our colleague human rights commissions across Canada to explore

this issue, led us to initiate this project and we're planning, actually, to release our phase 1 report later this month, and I'm drawing on some of our learnings through this phase of our project to present to you today.

We are focused on this critical issue because we appreciate that a failure to develop early reading skills has significant impacts on a student's later academic performance throughout K to 12, but they don't end there.

We have heard countless stories—you've heard them this evening—of how difficulties learning to read can impact a student's confidence in their academic abilities, their overall self-esteem and lead to significant mental health concerns.

This is consistent with academic research, which finds that too many students and parents that are impacted by this issue experience depression and anxiety, experience school avoidance, bullying, feelings of, very concerningly, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

And we know that the long-term consequences of low literacy are significant. It can impact employment opportunities and result in lower income, poverty and homelessness; and we have discussed and see in data how individuals with low literacy are overrepresented in our criminal justice system. In this way, reading is a key that unlocks a person's access to a matrix of rights, opportunities and possibilities.

As part of our project, we wanted to explore the issue of early screening because it's one of our key pillars that we're examining as part of this initiative, and we've really come to understand that it is an essential component for successfully supporting and teaching all students to read.

Early screening—we've chatted about this tonight—is a data-gathering tool to determine which learners in a classroom may encounter reading difficulties. They're meant to be fast, informal and evidence-based; that's critical. They should provide data that can be interpreted and used to predict future possible reading challenges. And the practice of early screening is intended to contribute to successful and inclusive approaches to teaching literacy skills, by proactively determining which students may require additional support in learning to read and what those supports should be.

Early screening is a key component of building those foundational literacy skills and that lifelong relationship with reading that is so crucial. Simply

put, it gives educators, caregivers and learners the opportunity and the tools, as early as possible, to know about possible reading difficulties and, importantly, do something about them.

The longer we wait to intervene in a learner's challenges with reading, the less likely they are to respond positively to intervention and the more difficult reading becomes and the less likely a learner will be motivated to read or find joy in it.

Early screening is also a component of a human-rights-informed approach to literacy and teaching in schools because it allows educators to proactively identify barriers and, in alignment with universal design for learning principles, work to remove them through strong, responsive, data-informed and what we call tiered instruction.

The peer-reviewed research on early screening for literacy, as well as the data gathered through our special project demonstrates overwhelmingly that acting early to identify and address reading difficulties is the far superior approach to delaying intervention and—or waiting to see if a learner's reading skills will improve on their own.

The negative tangible impact articulated by our special project participants and some of those perspectives you've heard this evening of not screening, screening infrequently, delayed screening, inconsistent screening practices, using improper screening tools or incorrectly using a proper screening tool—so in a practice that isn't meant by the tool itself—and not properly screening—using screening data, all of that has been shown to be really significant in a student's outcome.

And I think it's important to highlight that early screening is a clear recommendation of the Minister's Advisory Council on Inclusive Education, who, in their 2022 report, note, and I quote: assessment and resulting data collection improves student outcomes and teacher efficacy, strengthen inclusive practices and ensure a clear, cohesive, consistent understanding of appropriate instruction, assessment and reporting for all students. The data gathered at provincial divisional school and student levels will help inform decisions about ongoing resourcing and support and provide clear, consistent information for parents. End quote.

Now, we know that the Province is already moving ahead with plans with respect to early screening. In—as we continue to make these important strides in strengthening early screening for reading difficulties

and disabilities, we're cognizant of a few lessons learned from our project that I wanted to share here tonight.

It's really important to have a clear and common understanding of what constitutes an early screener. It should be evidence-based, reliable, objective and measurable. That's important because we heard consistently that different educators, different divisions have some differing ideas about what an early screener really is.

Another issue that we heard about was that even, again, when an appropriate screening tool has been used, it—we can't always guarantee that it will be used appropriately. For example, evidence-based screeners are accompanied by particular parameters. They're intended to be used in particular ways. And it's important because if they're not used appropriately, that could be impactful in terms of the data that we're gathering. So, very important that screeners be used not only as they're intended, but in the ways that is set by the screener itself.

And we've heard consistently through our engagements with the public and with educators about how important it is that the screener not end there, that the data gained from screening inform instructional practice.

We heard from participants in our special project that there really is a missing link between screening outcomes and what happens next, that screening can't be a stand-alone practice; it has to be a link in a chain of events that 'sets'—sets students up for the best possible success at learning to read.

Once a screening has been administered, the data or information from that screening must be interpreted and used to inform teaching praxis, including focused instruction and intervention for some students if needed. Many participants that we spoke with—particularly practitioners, clinicians and educators—noted that among making the link between screening and turning data into action will take time, training and support for educators, parents and students alike. And many have expressed to us that they had to educate themselves about the screener that they used and it's important as we roll this out that educators have support in doing so.

So finally, early screening cannot exist in a vacuum. It has to be accompanied by the other tenets of strong reading instruction: direct, explicit, systematic, evidence-based instruction; reading interventions that are supported by evidence and available to all students that need them; accommodation not in place of, but

as a support to good reading instruction; timely and accessible professional assessments; and very importantly, particularly for the rollout of early screening, ongoing professional development for all those involved in this work that is job-embedded, robust and flexible to meet the needs of all educators.

So I'll conclude my remarks there. In effect, we wanted to ensure that our learnings are reflected here this evening and speak to the importance of early screening in a comprehensive approach to reading instruction as a human rights-based issue.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Sharma.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Ms. Sharma, for your presentation and just all the work that you've done with early screening in your role at the Manitoba Human Rights Commission.

My question for you is, could you speak a little bit to the importance as to why the idea of early screening needs to be legislated and regulated and not just verbalized?

K. Sharma: Yes, thank you for that question.

I think that what we need to ensure is a strong, comprehensive provincial commitment to early screening and one that links practices of early screening to strong evidence and that has a really strong approach in terms of rollout if it is going to be successful, so that educators are really supported through good, job-embedded, ongoing, robust professional training to do the screening in an effective way; but then, really, to use that data to inform instructional practice.

* (20:20)

So in whatever form that takes, the important thing is that we have a robust province-wide approach to early screening.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you so very much for your work on this special initiative, Dr. Sharma, but also for your work, obviously, on human rights in Manitoba, generally.

I wish I had more than 45 seconds; I could say so many nice things about the work that you've done.

I believe that our government does now have a strong, comprehensive approach and an initiative and on—under the ministerial directive.

Something we have here in Manitoba, also, are democratically elected school boards. We believe strongly—our government believes strongly in the

need for a local voice, local autonomy, the freedom for local communities to make decisions to meet their local communities' need.

Do you—considering that we are seeing some ideological swings around the globe—I'm thinking about to the south of the border; I'm thinking about even other provinces. Sometimes education takes on a real ideological bent.

Do you see any risk in the legislation putting the final decision making in the minister—considering that there might be ideological swings in governments?

K. Sharma: Well, I think the risk of not ensuring a province-wide approach is that a comprehensive, you know, way of ensuring good reading instruction might be at risk in terms of those—whether they're ideological swings or philosophical swings or what have you.

So that's where I think, you know, the efforts that have taken place to date in terms of ministerial directives with respect to early screening are so critical. But I do appreciate, and I think Manitobans have made clear, that there is a role for local school boards in setting directions so that balance has to be found in terms of allowing local voice to guide the decision-making process.

That being said, that balance has to be between, you know, ensuring every student—no matter what corner of the province that they're in—has access to equitable education outcomes, no matter where they reside.

What we heard continuously is literacy is a key outcome of our education system. No matter where you reside, you should learn out of your K-to-12 education how to read. That is one of the pillars of what we're doing there in the education system.

So that being said, I think there has to be that right balance between clear provincial directive and the allowance of local school boards to set their guidance as well, yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Sharma.

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Ms. Sharma. Thank you for coming tonight.

And I just wanted to say how much I value the work that you do and the importance of this work, in particular. I think, when we look next door to Ontario and the impact that the Human Rights Commission there had with their report and the positive impacts

that's had in that province, I think that speaks to the importance of the work that you're doing here.

So I don't have a question, but feel free to comment.

And thank you for coming.

K. Sharma: Thank you.

And I will just say, whether it's the work of the commission in Ontario or Saskatchewan, we just feel it's really important that, no matter where a child resides in Canada, that they have access to the same high-quality, equitable education. And so we really want Canadian children, coast to coast to coast, to have access to the right to read.

MLA Cross: Thank you so much for bringing your expertise to this committee.

You said something really important. I agree. Early screening's super important. You said professional development embedded in the work that teachers do.

My question is this: What kind of conversations have taken place with the faculties of education to ensure that teachers that are graduating are prepared to do this sort of assessment or to do any kind of reading assessment?

You know, I graduated in 2015; I spent nine years teaching, and a very—I did a lot of teaching in that time. But I can tell you—

The Chairperson: MLA Cross, I'll just have to stop you for one moment.

Is there leave for MLA Cross to finish the question and for Ms. Sharma to have time to answer?
[Agreed]

Go ahead, MLA Cross.

MLA Cross: —because I wasn't prepared to do that; I learned it on the job.

So I think there has to be some responsibility and onus on our faculties of education.

Just what are your thoughts on that and what have you looked into?

K. Sharma: Thank you.

I think that you're absolutely correct, that there is a role for both in-service professional development as well as pre-service teacher education in improving the overall outcomes when it comes to reading. And giving our teachers who are clamouring—like, we heard over and over again that teachers are spending so much of their own funds to do professional development on

their own time to gain the skills that they need to be able to do this work. And that isn't, you know, fair for anyone in the system.

And so we really—we've had conversations, obviously, with the faculties of education. We've also been paying attention to previous reports, whether it's the Advisory Council on Inclusive Education, the K-to-12 review, that have all looked at, you know, the kinds of things we really need to do in terms of teacher education, to boost how we're approaching inclusive education more broadly and doing more than maybe just three credit hours to ensure that all teachers get what they need around inclusive education through their degree program.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your answer, Ms. Sharma, and for the presentation.

Next, we have David Grant. David Grant? So David will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Ms. Carrie Wood? Please go ahead with your presentation, whenever you're ready.

Thank you.

Carrie Wood (Private Citizen): Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight.

My name is Carrie Wood. I am a mom of two children who have both struggled to learn to read and an educator who has worked in the inner city in an elementary school teaching for more than a decade here in Winnipeg.

When my son started kindergarten already knowing most of his alphabet, I thought he would take off in reading. After all, we read to him since he was a baby, and he already knew the joy of a good book.

As a teacher, I knew how important reading was and I made it a priority. But my bid—by mid-grade 1, I was growing increasingly concerned. Still, people said things like—and I also thought things like: he's a boy; he has a late birthday; or just give him time.

I felt guilty, wondering if I just hadn't found his Harry Potter, you know, that one book that would help ignite his love of reading.

As a mom and grades 1-2 teacher, I felt frustrated and ashamed that I couldn't help my own son who basically had no barriers in front of him. I didn't understand why he was struggling or what to do. He worked so hard and I felt like a failure. I eventually took a mental health leave from work for depression and anxiety.

Looking back, I realize the system failed us both. Without early assessment, I was left guessing and he was left waiting. Universal screening makes sure no parent or teacher sits in that same confusion again.

In grade 3, my son was diagnosed with a specific learning disability in reading and written expression. I'm forever thankful to the school psychologist who said, it's called dyslexia, because we didn't use that word in education. I was told that that didn't exist in Canada, that the D-S-F-M calls it something else—or not D-S—I got the wrong initials. Anyways.

Okay. Back on track.

So once he was diagnosed, I began learning everything I could and quickly realized how much I didn't know about how children learn to read. I feel strongly as a teacher I should have learned these things in university, but I didn't, even with a major in English.

So that's when we began paying for private tutoring so he could receive the explicit, systematic phonics instruction he needed all along. It wasn't a quick fix. For the last four years, he's been logging on for tutoring at 7:40 a.m., four days a week.

A few years later, I was sure my daughter's story was going to be different. At the beginning of grade 1, there are no concerns. But by year's end, I paid to have her screened privately. That screening uncovered significant issues neither her teacher nor I had caught.

My daughter now also attends online tutoring four mornings a week. What a privilege.

My children's teachers and I, too, didn't know what we didn't know. We were doing our best with the tools we had. No blame, no shame, but it wasn't enough.

If we had the knowledge and tools to provide the support my kids needed, we all would have used them without hesitation. Interventions are twice as effective before the end of grade 1, and we lost precious time. Our story didn't have to go that way.

* (20:30)

Every child has the right to be taught to read within our public school system. It shouldn't be something reserved for those who can advocate effectively, afford tutoring and access private assessments, as my family has been fortunate to do.

While these are my personal experiences, they reflect broader challenges that many students, families and educators face in our schools. I'm here tonight as both a parent and a teacher to show my support for

Bill 225 and to highlight why early screening and targeted support are so critical for all Manitoba children.

You might think this bill isn't necessary, that educators know what to do, that each school division should be allowed to decide how they want to approach reading instruction and assessment. However, the challenge is that most of us have never been exposed to the vast body of scientific research related to how children learn to read. Instead, we have been told to focus on motivation, to promote the joy of reading and that doing—and that through doing this, kids will pick up those foundational skills.

But here's the hard truth. Joy and a big book collection are not enough if students can't access the words on the page. There is nothing joyful about sitting in a classroom year after year, unable to read what everyone else is reading. There's no joy in guessing and being left behind or in thinking you're the problem when the system hasn't given you the support you need.

So let's be clear: joy is not an excuse to avoid change. Joy is the reason for the change.

Universal screening in kindergarten doesn't threaten critical thinking, agency, joyful learning or personalized instruction. It protects them. It gives teachers the information they need to provide targeted support, ensuring that instruction is tailored to each student—or, each child. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it's quite the opposite.

At my school, over 40 per cent of students are Indigenous. Many come to school carrying both the intergenerational trauma of residential schools and the ongoing legacy of systemic inequities. Unlike my children who have access to private tutoring and additional supports, the vast majority of students I work with don't have that luxury. This lack of support contributes to widening gaps in literacy and leads to higher rates of disengagement and dropout. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls on us to close educational gaps. Universal screening and evidence-based instruction are tools for change so that every learner in our care, especially those historically underserved can reach their full potential.

The late Justice Murray Sinclair said, education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it. By acting now through early screening, targeted support and evidence-based instruction, we can change the trajectory of lives and ensure that education becomes the bridge to opportunity, equity and justice for all students.

Bill 225 represents a turning point, an opportunity to establish early screening as a right for every child. I believe it strengthens the NDP's current initiative by mandating screening starting in kindergarten. This ensures students are identified early, allowing the intervention to begin when it's most effective. The bill states that the school board must ensure that further assessments and other specialized resources are allocated based on the results of the screening. That means schools won't just be identifying students who are struggling; they'll be required to respond.

Amending The Manitoba Public Schools Act would make this commitment permanent, ensuring that screening isn't just optional or temporary. It's important, as many other people have said here tonight, to remember bill-passing of Bill 225 is only the start. It must be paired with action from all levels, including universities. It can only succeed if teachers are fully supported by the system, not left to figure it out on their own. Teachers need training, guidance and resources to turn screening data into action so that every child succeeds.

We have the research. We have the evidence. What we need now is the courage to act. It was promising to see the unanimous vote to bring Bill 225 to committee. My husband and children were there with me that day, and I was proud they could see political leaders from across parties do the right thing.

Please pass Bill 225 and give every child in Manitoba the right to read.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Wood.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Ms. Wood, for your presentation.

Again, more of a comment. I want to say sorry for the experience that you've had within our education system. It sounds like it did fail you on many accounts, and I'm glad that you're here tonight advocating for a better education system.

You raised a very important point, that universal screening needs to be made available to everyone, no matter of one's socio-economic background, no matter where you live here in Manitoba, and that's what this legislation does.

I believe that if the government wants to demonstrate what they say they are going to do, they need to pass this legislation so that it is tangible, so that it is a real commitment and not just words that can be easily

taken back and that it is compared to other provinces where it is, in fact, legislated.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Lamoureux.

C. Wood: Was there a question? Oh, thank goodness. I blacked out.

Okay. I'm good.

The Chairperson: MLA Cross—

Floor Comment: Actually, wait. Can I just—

The Chairperson: You can respond if you'd like.

C. Wood: Okay. I just want to say, one thing about teachers is that they're really, really incredible. I am the past president of the Manitoba Reading Association. And the Manitoba Reading Association and the Manitoba Council of Reading Clinicians have come together to host a nine-part PD series called Monthly Meet-Ups: practical conversations on screening and early literacy. These are happening after school.

We thought we would have, like, 10 people sign up, and we were excited for that. We're at 145. Teachers want this information, and many, many are really wishing they'd gotten it in university.

Thank you.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you very much for your presentation, Mrs. Wood. Carrie, it's very nice to see you again.

I just really appreciate your advocacy, and it's voices like yours—is the reason why our government, in April, implemented a universal screener.

And so I just want to thank you for sharing your story. It was a real pleasure to get to meet with you in my office quite recently. And we—you shared your experience as a teacher but also as a parent. And we have some similarities in that regard.

So I just wanted to thank you very much for bringing your voice forward and for being one of the voices that has contributed to the action that our government has taken.

The Chairperson: Ms. Wood, would you like to respond to that?

C. Wood: I don't know if you had to be here tonight or if it was a choice, but thank you so much for being here tonight. That shows the commitment and that you're here and you're wanting to learn and be open.

Yes. So thank you very much.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you, Carrie, for coming.

You've been so generous with your time and your expertise, by the way. I know you've met with me; you've met with members of my caucus; you've clearly met with the minister—and all the work that you've done with our colleague from Tyndall Park. So thank you for that. It is making a difference. You've seen that here tonight.

I just wanted to echo something that you said and what my colleague said about the importance of legislating this and making that firm commitment that can't be changed on a whim. I think it's really important that we get this bill passed tonight.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. Wood, would you like to respond?

C. Wood: I agree.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

MLA Cross: I'll try and say this really quickly.

Thank you for sharing your story. My story is just like yours. I have three children: my two daughters, very successful, high achieving, no trouble in school; my son, two rounds of reading recovery, still struggled right through high school, tried university, hated it. I became a teacher and I sat in the classroom at the beginning, kind of going, why didn't they teach me how to teach kids how to read? Why didn't I have that skill?

And so I'm asking, hopefully respectfully, that the work that you do with your organization and your work as a teacher, please help advocate to post-secondaries to start, you know, training teachers so that we have the tools to give kids what they need.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

C. Wood: I am absolutely trying.

Look, the universities are part of the big system, and some of the beliefs are strong. I know there was an open letter sent to Minister Schmidt among—to many other people. And there's lots, actually, I agreed with in the letter—things like waiting on the curriculum until after the MHRC report, I agreed on that; knowing who wrote the curriculum, I agreed on that.

* (20:40)

But at the end, they called—they said the MHRC report was initiated by a highly organized lobby group—

The Chairperson: Very sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Wood, just for a moment.

Is there leave for her to finish her answer? *[Agreed]*

Yes, thank you.

Procedural. Please go ahead, sorry.

C. Wood: Sorry—by a highly organized lobby group. And then they proceeded to say basically why things should stay the same and stay status quo. They're reluctant to change.

And that's part of the problem here, is that the system at the very top where teachers get their training, those leaders are not supporting them in the way that we're asking to be supported.

They're saying, no, you're okay. And that's a problem, so I'm right there with you with the universities. I'm very hopeful—very hopeful—because we're all good people and we want to do the right thing.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thanks so much for your answer, Ms. Wood, and for your presentation.

Next up we have Dr. Jina Pagura.

Dr. Pagura, you can go ahead with your presentation. Thank you.

Jina Pagura (Private Citizen): Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today in support of Bill 225. My words will echo many of those of the eloquent and passionate speakers you've already heard tonight, so bear with me; I know it's getting late here.

My name is Dr. Jina Pagura and I'm a pediatrician and a parent here in Winnipeg. My support of this bill stems from both my personal and professional experiences. Reading did not come naturally to my son, despite my husband and I reading books to him daily since he was an infant. He has always been smart, and I assumed he would pick things up easily in school. However, it became clear to me by grade 2 that he was not picking up on the vowel sounds or phonics that I assumed he was being explicitly taught.

His reading instruction was centred on cue-based strategies. Example: look at the first letter and picture and guess the word, rather than on explicit phonics. For example, how the short A sound says ah like in apple, and how the long A sound says A as in cape. The cue-based strategies did not work for him. Reading was not joyful, and he asked me if he would ever love to read like I did.

As a pediatrician, I was in a privileged position to pick up on these struggles and look for assessment and tutoring outside of school. With direct instruction,

using a structured literacy approach that focused on phonics and decoding, his reading and writing improved. Reading and writing became fun; it was no longer a painful struggle.

He did not have an underlying learning disability, but rather he was what we could describe as an instructional casualty. His incredible tutor made his learning exciting and opened up the world of reading for him. When I brought up my concerns to my son's teacher prior to seeking out assessment and tutoring privately, I was told that he was exactly where he should be and that there were no concerns with his reading or writing.

And I say this with no intention to place blame. My son was not screened with an evidence-based screening tool that could've picked up on those struggles. I'm well versed in screening tests and their requirements based on my medical and research training. Just as we don't expect physicians to pick up certain diseases without a valid screening tool—as an example, the use of Pap smears in screening for cervical cancer—nor should we expect teachers to pick out all struggling readers without valid and reliable screening methods.

Such tools are available for this exact purpose, and Bill 225 aims to put these in the hands of teachers so that they can be utilized. These methods will pick up all struggling readers and allow the opportunity to provide early intervention.

In my pediatric clinic, I see children frequently who are struggling with reading or who are eventually diagnosed with learning disabilities. These children sometimes present to me because their parents are worried about their reading, but so often it's other concerns like mental health struggles, just profound fatigue, concerns with possible inattention or depression. If reading challenges are not addressed early on, these children fall further and further behind, making it more and more unlikely that they will ever catch up.

Low literacy in adulthood is associated with multiple negative health outcomes, some of which we've heard about already today, including lower educational and career attainment, poor general health, mental health issues, substance use and incarceration. Statistics from the Canadian government show that a staggering 42 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 16 and 65 fail to attain a level of reading skill typically required for high school completion.

Data from our own province, available on the Manitoba government website, shows that only

44.9 per cent of children in this province are meeting expectations for reading in grade 3. And even worse, only 22.5 per cent of children from northern regions and 27.7 per cent of children of self-declared Indigenous identity are meeting these expectations.

This is unacceptable. The current barriers for families facing literacy challenges are vast. Parents who cannot read well themselves, or who trust that issues will be brought up by the school, may be completely unaware that their child is struggling. Mandating evidence-based screening starting in kindergarten ensures that all children with these challenges are identified.

Once those issues are identified, instruction and intervention also need to be evidence-based. Despite the fact that it is well established within the scientific literature that phonics-based instruction or structured literacy is the most effective method for teaching the decoding skills necessary for literacy, this is not mandated in all schools in Manitoba. At present many families resort to private assessments and tutoring, which are extremely costly and simply inaccessible for many families. This only widens the gap between those who can afford these assessments and interventions and those who cannot. This disproportionately affects racialized children, new immigrants and those of lower socio-economic status.

Both the Manitoba Pediatric Society and the Canadian Paediatric Society have recognized the need for evidence-based literacy screening, instruction and intervention, and I have provided copies of those statements for your review. I would strongly suggest that school districts be given direction in terms of which measures are valid, reliable and appropriate for use for universal screening, such as DIBELS or Acadience reading measures. Next steps include mandating evidence-based instruction and intervention methods.

Bill 225 is a step in the right direction towards systemic change within Manitoba public education to ensure that evidence-based approaches to screening, instruction and intervention are available to all learners. This is an issue not only of education, but of optimizing the health of all Manitobans. Literacy is a fundamental, basic human right, and all children have the right to be taught how to read effectively, in a publicly-funded education system.

Thank you for your time.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Pagura.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for your presentation here this evening, and I actually have two questions for you. You can pick and choose if you'd like.

I was wondering if you could speak just a little bit more to your experience and perspective as a pediatrician and what you are seeing here in Manitoba, as well as why it's important this is mandated, as you say, and put into legislation, not just verbalized.

J. Pagura: Absolutely. I think for pediatricians, so much of what we see these days is increasing mental health issues, and so much of that can be tied back to a lot of these issues and struggles with learning.

One of my mentors talks often about how we had a meeting with some of the psychiatrists, talking about how can we improve the mental health of kids in Manitoba, because it's very challenging. The resources are not available, and medical treatment only goes so far. And really, his answer was, literacy. Teach them how to read, and this will help.

And so I think that is—it's a core thing that we can do, that should be done, and I think mandating it is important, like we said. So it's an ongoing commitment and it's something that is going to remain. I think there needs to be room for evidence because science changes. We learn things, we know that things can change, and that's part of the scientific process; we learn, we do better over time.

And so there needs to be room for that flexibility, but I think it's really, really important that anything that is mandated needs to be reviewed with experts in that content area, that can really speak to the scientific evidence for those measures.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Dr. Pagura.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you so much, Doctor, for your presentation, for taking your time out to be here with us tonight and share your expertise and your opinions and your experience with us.

I agree with you wholeheartedly that mandating early screening is essential. That's why our government took immediate action and has done so not just in K to 3 but all the way to grade 4.

And I also agree with you that there is a need—you mentioned the need for flexibility, and I think that's one reason why a ministerial directive in this case provides us that flexibility. We have mandated that a universal screening tool is required, and I just wanted to provide you some assurance that—how closely our department is working with school divisions in making

that selection. It is absolutely not a free-for-all. We have a list and we're working closely with school divisions.

You mentioned DIBELS; that is one of the ones that we are actively promoting—many school divisions are already using.

And so we're working with school divisions to find those best practices while also providing them and leaving them with that flexibility—

* (20:50)

The Chairperson: Minister Schmidt, sorry, we're at the end of our 45 seconds there—yes.

Dr. Pagura, did you want to respond to what was said?

J. Pagura: Thank you. I'm very happy to hear that.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you, Dr. Pagura. I just wanted to say thank you for taking time to share your expertise and also for providing written material, because that's very helpful for—

Floor Comment: Just some light reading material.

Mrs. Cook: No, this is great for us to refer back to later, so thank you very much.

Floor Comment: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation, Dr. Pagura.

Patricia Macdonald is up next. We'll just see if she's online.

Okay, Patricia Macdonald will be at the bottom of the list.

Tianna Voort? Hello. You can go ahead with your presentation.

Tianna Voort (Private Citizen): Hi, everyone. Good evening. My name is Tianna Voort and I work with an organization called Dyslexia Canada where I run a parents support program for families with reading difficulties.

Tonight, you've heard from about 15 families, but last year alone, our program hope—helped more than 900 families across Canada, including many here in Manitoba, to find effective support in the public education system. I also run an in-person support group for Manitoba families and have had the privilege of supporting them in their efforts to secure basic and essential reading instruction and support for their children within the public education system.

I want to be really clear that reading difficulties, including dyslexia, can be prevented for most children when needs are identified early and targeted instruction begins right away. The window between ages four to seven is crucial for developing foundational word-reading skills like connecting sounds to letters and blending sounds together into words.

Yet every day—and I want to make that clear—every day, I hear the same story. Parents notice early that something isn't right. Their kid struggles with letters or sounds; they avoid books; they seem lost in class. And they ask for help and they're told, don't worry, some kids just take longer.

Those reassurances cost families something incredibly precious: time. By the time many children finally receive proper support, they are years behind, frustrated and convinced that they aren't smart. And once a child falls behind, helping them catch up is extremely difficult, time-consuming and costly.

Research from Dr. Maureen Lovett at SickKids Hospital in Toronto shows that children who receive interventions in grade 1 make twice the gains of those who begin later. Screening lets teachers act before failure, providing targeted supports that keep children on track rather than trying to help them catch up years later.

A universal reading screener is a short, reliable check to see whether a child is developing foundational skills needed for reading success. I want to be really clear that this is not an assessment for a learning disability; it simply helps us tell whether there is a possible difficulty. Screening helps children—or teachers to see who's on track to meet future reading goals and who needs more targeted support.

I'm very, very happy with the government's announcement last spring of its support for universal screening and for providing guidance to school divisions that they should start screening children this year. This is a very positive development, and I believe that this bill builds on that commitment. It will ensure that every child in the province is screened using vetted screening tools, and that this practice is sustained for generations to come.

I also want to be really clear that I believe that Manitoba has incredible educators who care deeply about their children and their students, but the assessment tools that they are given often make it impossible for them to catch reading difficulties early.

For the past several years, the Manitoba Human Rights Commission has been conducting an investi-

gation into our approach to teaching children to read. And the preliminary findings that they shared in the spring—the thing that stood out to me was actually what Karen said as well. The majority of educators who participated in the survey told the commission that they were already screening students. Screening wasn't a problem. But when asked to list the tools that they were using for screening, all but few listed assessments that were evidence-based. None—almost none were valid or reliable screening tools.

Many of the assessments currently being used across the province are subjective, time-consuming and unreliable, and this has led to many students slipping through the cracks and not getting the support that they need in early years.

The results have been widespread and devastating. Provincial data shows that only 45 per cent of grade 3 students in this province meet literacy expectations, and for Indigenous students that number drops to 28 per cent. In other words, more than half of our grade 3 students are not meeting literacy expectations by the end of primary years. Yet despite years of poor provincial reading results, many education leaders are resistant to change or do not understand what tools are effective for early reading screening and which tools are not.

Just last week I spoke to teachers in a school division in Winnipeg who told me that they wanted to use evidence-based tools to screen reading—to screen students this fall. However, they were forbidden from doing so. Instead, they were required by district leadership to continue using outdated, non-evidence-based reading assessments. In this division, due to resistance from leadership, many children will continue to slip through the cracks and fall behind.

In another Manitoba school division, we heard this month that leadership have made a really good-faith effort to follow government guidance, but mistakenly chosen a tool called Really Great Reading. This assessment is not evidence-based. It's not intended for screening purposes and does not accurately predict which children will require support. In this division, despite supportive leadership, many children will continue to slip through the cracks and fall behind.

There are divisions, such as Louis Riel, Hanover and Evergreen, that are using research-validated screeners, like Acadience Reading or DIBELS, but the lack of consistency across Manitoba means two children in the same province can have completely different outcomes or chances of being identified and

helped. I believe that this inconsistency is what Bill 225 will fix.

When screening is universal, every child is assessed, not only those who already seem to be struggling. This is really important because when screening is left to personal discretion, unconscious bias and misconceptions can determine who gets help.

When schools fail to identify students at risk, those students are denied timely access to interventions. And I want to be clear that this harm falls most heavily on marginalized and code-protected communities, who often have the least access to private assessments and advocacy.

Universal evidence-based screening tools help to correct those inequities. It ensures a child's chance to learn to read doesn't depend on postal code, background or parental resources. This is why universal screening is important for ensuring equity and is recommended by human rights commissions across Canada.

As the Ontario Human Rights Commission report—the Right to Read report concluded: the research on screening for early reading is advanced, the financial cost is minimal and the impact of current practices is harmful. That applies here in Manitoba today.

In my work, I see every day what early identification can do and I've seen the costs of waiting: the anxiety in parents' voices, tears of eight- and nine-year-olds who already believe that they're stupid and the loss of confidence that can last a lifetime.

Every single one of those 900 children were capable. They just needed someone to notice sooner. Codifying universal screening isn't just good policy; it builds sustainability into literacy reform. It ensures that screening isn't a one-time announcement or pilot. It becomes a lasting commitment that protects every child's right to read.

Bill 225 is essential, but it is not the end of this journey. We also need a new language curriculum that includes specific and measurable outcomes and foundational skills, funding to implement interventions that are evidence-based, progress monitoring to track the effectiveness of these interventions to ensure that students who are below benchmark are getting the supports they need to close the gap, and better standards for teacher training to ensure that future teachers are taught about evidence-based practices for teaching and assessing reading.

* (21:00)

Imagine a Manitoba where every K-to-3 classroom begins the year with a quick, reliable check of reading skills, where teachers have clear data to guide instruction, where parents understand their child's reading progress and where children receive help before frustration and shame sets in.

That's what Bill 225 makes possible. It shifts our system from reactive to proactive, from waiting until children fail to ensuring that they never fall behind in the first place.

Thank you, and I hope to see you all at the Manitoba Human Rights Commission's Right to Read release on October 30. I hope that together we can ensure that no child in this province is left behind.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mrs. Voort.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for your presentation.

This is not a question. I just want to again thank you for your presentation and the work that you're doing with Dyslexia Canada, and just say happy International Dyslexia Awareness Day to everyone here. I'm sorry, I didn't get the memo to wear red, but I totally would have.

I appreciate you pointing out, though, that the reality is there are still a lot of not evidence-based screening still going on, despite the government's directive.

And, again, this just echoes the importance of why it needs to be legislated. Saying it in a press release is not enough; we need to make it official and legit so matter what happens, the children going through school is not going to change for them from year to year.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Would you like to respond to that, Ms. Voort?

T. Voort: No, I would just echo—I would echo your sentiment that, you know, the directive from the government is a great start, but we've already seen how a lack of clear direction has already led to some challenges within school boards across the province, and hopefully Bill 225 can help to set those on a clear path.

Mr. Blashko: Thank you so much for your work. It's clearly a passion of yours, or you fake it really well.

But I was just curious—you got—you've engaged with, like, school divisions; you're here on the political side. I'm curious if, in your role, you've had

conversations with universities and colleges in their training of teachers and how those conversations have started, how—or if they have started and how they're going. *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Ms. Voort.

T. Voort: Sorry.

The Chairperson: That's okay. It's procedural. I just need to recognize you so Hansard catches it.

T. Voort: No, that's a really great question.

So Dyslexia Canada is a non-for-profit organization. I specialize in working with families, and so that's my job. All day long, I work with families.

I do know that our executive director has engaged with, you know, universities across Canada. I'm not sure how receptive the universities in Manitoba have been, but you could send her an email, and I'm sure that she would be happy to answer that question for you. Yes.

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Mrs. Voort. Thank you for coming and for all the work you do with Dyslexia Canada.

You touched on some of the differences between the bill and the government's directive in your presentation, and one of the reasons that I like my colleague's bill and support this bill is that it takes the directive a step further in requiring the results to be provided to the family within 30 days and for further follow-up and resources to be allocated.

I just wondered if you could speak to the value and importance of those two things. *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Mrs. Voort.

I also need to do my job here. Sorry.

T. Voort: Didn't want to get in trouble.

No, I think that this is really important, right. We—you know, I think there's a sentiment from the schools and the school divisions that teachers are doing their best, and we know that teachers are doing their best, to communicate that with parents. But it doesn't always happen without a directive. And so most of the parents that I speak to—at some point, you know, teachers are taking them aside and saying, kind of behind the table, I think there might be a problem, but don't say it was me.

And so it is really important that we empower teachers to be able to share that information.

I don't think that the results of the screening assessment are going to be much different than the

provincial assessment. I think we're going to see, you know, the majority of students not at benchmark and, I guess, one of my fears is that if there is no directive to share that information with parents, that school boards won't want to share with 50 per cent of students that they're not meeting benchmarks; but that's really important information for parents to know.

So mandating that parents are given that information so that they can make timely decisions about their child's education is really important.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mrs. Voort.

Are there any further questions?

Thanks for your presentation tonight.

Andrea Richardson? Please go ahead with your presentation. *[interjection]* Of course, yes, once you're ready. *[interjection]* You can begin and they'll pass out your materials.

Thank you so much.

Andrea Richardson (Ears for Life Audiology): Hi. My name is Andrea Richardson and I am a doctor of audiology. When I was a grad student, I helped with Dr. Gerrard and the Conservatives to pass the Universal Newborn Hearing Screening bill. It was fully implemented in 2016 to ensure that every baby born in this province has their hearing screened at birth.

I worked for six years at Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, also known as MFNERC, developing an educational audiology program providing audiological services in remote communities in Manitoba.

Currently, I am co-owner of Ears for Life Audiology, the only pediatric private practice clinic in the province. There are only 42 education audiologists in the entire country of Canada, and we are two of them. The goal of the standing committee is universal screening for learning disabilities/difficulties for kindergarten to grade 3.

Now, as we all know, we learn through our senses. Hearing ability has a direct correlation on learning to read, write and spell. If you want to imagine a pyramid: reading is at the top of the pyramid; the level below it is language; and how we develop language is the bottom part of this pyramid, which is hearing. A two-year-old, they learn language not by speaking, but by sitting on the ground playing and listening to the adults having conversations. They need to be able to hear to do that.

If a child has a permanent hearing impairment or fluctuating hearing loss—now, a fluctuating hearing loss refers to children who can have heads colds or chronic ear infections—at any given time, 30 per cent of school-aged children will have a fluctuating hearing loss. Now, including children with an auditory processing weakness, they're going to be at a disadvantage to learn language and that will directly correlate with how they learn to read, spell and write.

Any degree of hearing loss causes an individual great difficulty understanding speech in noisy environments such as a classroom. As you can see right now, I'm speaking into a speaker, right? This is essentially improving your access to spoken language. If I wasn't to have this, you would all be straining to hear, and you as an adult, you can say: Speak into the speaker; I can't hear you. But if you're a little six-year-old and you're just—you don't have the learned experience, the life experience, you're just going to sit there and go along with it. Kids just want to be compliant; they just want to learn. That's just—they're little.

So Elizabeth Adams, Ph.D., clinical psychologist at The River School in Washington, DC, stated that having a strong language foundation is central to learning. She says: without this strong foundation, there can be some academic gaps, but if a child has a language model they can access, they should be able to learn.

When we were with the organization MFNERC developing our—the audiology program, our first goal was to perform hearing screenings to identify children with possible hearing loss because approximately—this is on the low end, this is old; it's probably way higher now—approximately 12 per cent of school-aged children have a permanent hearing loss and only 4 per cent are diagnosed.

* (21:10)

Because hearing loss can happen at any age, children should be screened in kindergarten, grade 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9. Currently, many schools only perform hearing screenings in kindergarten and grade 1. Doing the hearing screenings helped us identify children with hearing loss and alert our educational psychologists to these children. We had the—it was a great model; we had all the services under one roof, so we could just walk down the hallway and we'd just talk to everyone. There were no boundaries; no, like, red tape, because everyone was at—housed.

So if the children were on their caseload for an evaluation, the educational psychologists would borrow

a personal assisted listening device to help ensure the child was getting all of the auditory information necessary so the hearing loss would not skew the results. That being said, they would also use the devices when they suspected hearing loss and/or other attentive challenges the child may be experiencing.

When you're talking about universal screening for learning disabilities difficulties, you have to ensure that the children have normal hearing before screening them, or you may not be screening for what you think you are screening for.

In a classroom, we would like the teacher's voice to be louder than the ambient noise. Sorry, lost my place.

In truth—sorry—it is the same volume or softer. Volume drops in half every six feet, so that child at the back of the class is missing a lot of auditory information. That's why we're always told to sit near the front.

As an adult, you stand at the back of the class, you naturally feel that you are hearing everything. However, your brain fills in the blanks for the things that you aren't hearing. This is how you get along in a noisy environment: restaurants, all those types of social gatherings, all that kind of thing.

Once again, I allude to: a child does not have the language history to fill in those blanks, so they feel like a deer in headlights, and they smile like they hear you, but they don't understand you. And that's been alluded to with a lot of these—the children that are—the learning disabilities.

Young children are always—this is—wait. This is part of auditory processing, which doesn't fully develop until a child is anywhere between 12 to 18 years of age. Young children are always at a deficit in a classroom unless they have adequate access to spoken language. One way to ensure that they are hearing everything is the use of a sound field system. It helps all children. There are studies that have shown that spelling tests and reading greatly improve as a result of the use of a sound system in the classrooms.

I had two grade 5 students that had hearing loss but were not hearing aid candidates, which happens; the fluctuating hearing loss, minimal hearing loss. So we put a sound field system in the classroom and, to be honest, the teacher was super reluctant to use it. That happens: my voice is loud enough; I have a teacher voice. No, that's a myth.

However, by the end of the school year, the students were moving to a new class and the system was moving with them. She wanted to keep it because it made such a difference in the learning environment in the classroom, creating that positive inclusivity, making that—changing it so, I'm struggling, but now I can hear the teacher; even though my hearing may be normal, I'm not distracted by all that other stuff going around me, which is what a sound field does.

We have repeatedly heard that: she wanted to keep it. We have repeatedly heard this from every classroom teacher. Once you put it in, they don't ever want to give it back. Because it helps their voice too. They don't have to—as soon as we raise our voice, our intonation changes, and now we're really—kids are really sensitive to those changes, and then just going to shut down, not go to school, don't feel welcome, warm safe environment, so they go down another path, which has been alluded to too. So I'm just sort of backing up everything that's being said.

There are even pass-around microphones that can be utilized, and this helps teach turn-taking, public speaking and encourages classroom participation, because you've got to be, like, a rock star. McSporran from 1997 argues that possible—possibly the most cost-effective, appropriate and acceptable way of enhancing—maximizing the classroom acoustic environment is through the use of a signal-to-noise enhancing technology. Sound field system. Speakers.

By hearing what is being taught, every child benefits and enjoys a higher degree of achievement. The goal of Bill 225 is to identify students who may have a learning disability difficulty, to not let these kids fall through the cracks because, to be honest, when kids from the clinic, when we're doing auditory processing testing, I—we have kids that are—it—getting 90s in—like, 80s and 90s, and they've just been struggling, and they're older, so they know something is wrong, and they encourage their parents, because the parents have no idea.

And then you're, like—you're just amazed at the amount of work that these students are putting in to just maintaining just so that they can keep up appearances. They're working—every student's worked hard, but this is just—you can just see that, despite the challenges, they're still performing at a high level. And it's not intelligence; it's just they learn differently.

We would like to see the standing committee to understand the importance of hearing and learning disabilities in the classroom.

(1) Students from K to 3 need to have their hearing screened prior to any learning disability screening.

(2) If a hearing loss—any degree—of any degree is present, it needs to be addressed before screening for a learning disability.

(3) I think I said three twice. Once a child has been diagnosed with a learning disability, they should be provided with access to spoken language, hearing loss or not. To provide that, it is the use of the sound field systems in the classroom. The sound field systems help create that level playing field for the children, and it just changes—it's a game changer—it's thinking outside the box.

If this is passed, Manitoba could be, like, the gold standard for all other provinces. And the educational audiology—we're starting our own association. Long story short, there—we're trying to create that sort of standard so that you can go onto the national board and you can see all the resources for all things learning and hearing, and it's just—it's our chance to shine. And we've been saying this for years with regards to sound fields in hearing and learning disabilities—just difficulties. And we see it first hand.

So this is just a positive thing, and it's thinking outside the box, and everything that's awesome needs to be changed, and we can't be scared of change. We just have to just jump in and do it, and I speak from experience because if I hadn't, as a grad student, pushed—

The Chairperson: Sorry to interrupt for just one moment. I just have to ask leave from—is there leave from the committee to allow her to finish the presentation? *[Agreed]*

A. Richardson: It'll be two seconds. If I didn't push to get that newborn hearing screening passed, and it was just—it never would have—we still would have been sitting on it, to be honest, and that was—we started doing the talking in 2009.

So, yes, change.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much, Ms. Richardson, for your presentation.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you, Dr. Richardson, for your presentation and just the reminder to highlight the importance of hearing before screening tests, specifically.

I actually have two questions for you if you can answer. Do you know if there—is there any mandate in education for access to spoken language, is one, and

can you expand and share a bit more about what auditory processing is?

Floor Comment: With regards—oh, sorry.

The Chairperson: Yes, go ahead.

A. Richardson: I've been sitting here for two hours. You would think I would know the routine. Nope. Sorry.

There—with regards to the mandate to education for access to spoken language, this is kind of interesting. If you attend post-secondary and you're in the workplace, they have to provide accommodations, and it's based on the duty to accommodate and the excessive—Accessible Canada Act and the Canadian Human Rights Act. But, if you're in K to 12, there's nothing. I don't understand that. But, anyways.

And then with auditory processing, basically it's what we do with what we hear, and it's normal hearing, but you can still have difficulty understanding. And it can co-exist with other diagnoses, such as 96 per cent of children with dyslexia will have APD—auditory processing. Approximately 70 per cent of children with ADHD have APD, and children who have chronic ear infection or who may have had a head injury may also have APD and there is also a genetic component to it as well.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Richardson.

MLA Cross: Thank you for your presentation. I've already kind of spoken about, like, my journey throughout teaching. One of the jobs I had in the education system was I did vision and hearing screening in River East Transcona School Division.

I don't know if that still happens. That was many, many years ago, and if it is happening, can you tell us at what age it's happening. Is it happening in all divisions? Is it a standard right across the province?

A. Richardson: There is no standard across the province. The Winnipeg School Division, I know they have a very successful—they're the only school division that has a very successful audiology program, and—but as far as other school divisions, I don't know. Most—like I said, most schools only do K and 1 and—but I just don't know that there's that standard.

* (21:20)

And, once again, there's, like, everyone—there's—you can train anyone to do the hearing screening, to be honest, but it's just finding that time to do it. And it's not hard; I was just up in St. Theresa Point—I go there once a month and do all the hearing—we screened

early years and middle years in three days, and I got all the information, all the data—just like what we need: raw data—and I did all the grades, even though we were supposed to do every opposite, because it had been so long and I needed—I wanted all the data.

And this is awesome. You would think that there would be a higher rate. Well, when I broke down the numbers—got to love science, math—the numbers aren't any higher as opposed to what the world expects. So it's just a lot all at once, but then once it all gets on that path, then it'll just be easy to maintain. But it's just getting that initial data, which I'm very happy to say that I was able to do, cause that data's never been obtained before.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: I thank you so much for coming and for sharing this very important information. I just wanted to, you know, validate some of what you said from like a layperson-parent perspective. I have some experience with—personally—with early, early hearing loss and the impact that it makes when you know that it's a problem and you can intervene to address it.

And I've also seen, in some of the classrooms I've gone into, sound-field systems like you talked about. I think that's something that would be really worth exploring that, you know, we should mention to the minister to look into because we get to go into classrooms for I Love to Read Month, and I remember being in one classroom and the teacher gave me the microphone, which was just a thing you wear around your neck, when I got to read, and what a difference it makes for the kids in that classroom to be able to hear clearly and without really trying. So thank you for bringing that up. *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Ms. Richardson.

A. Richardson: The look on the kids' faces and the teachers' faces, it's just—you can't take that away. And that's at any age. The kids, once I've—'cause we installed them in the classroom up in St. Theresa, and the kids just love it. They're like: the best part is when my teacher remembers to wear it. That's a whole other thing.

Anyway, but it's just you don't notice that immediately and that just helps overall the learning—with the learning difficulties, disabilities—over time; and it just—it's such a huge difference.

The Chairperson: Thank you so much for your presentation tonight. Thank you.

Next up is Mr. Ron Cadez. Please go ahead with your presentation.

Ron Cadez (Louis Riel School Division): Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to speak. My name is Ron Cadez. I'm assistant superintendent in Louis Riel School Division here in Winnipeg, and I am here on behalf of the LRSD, and I have the privilege to express our support for Bill 225.

I'm here because Bill 225 ensures early, consistent screening using evidence-based tools, timely communication with families and appropriate access to supports, which are critical steps needed for all learners.

As a division, LRSD is entering its fifth year of implementing evidence-based universal early screening paired with evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention. We began this journey because after an extensive internal review, we realized—as a system—we didn't know enough to meet the needs of some of our learners.

When I think of my personal journey and that review process, I think of a grade 3 student that I'll refer to as James. About eight years ago, when I was a principal, James sat in my office trying to read a book with one short sentence per page: the ball is red, the ball is blue; each sentence supported by a picture. He laboured over every single word. Some days he could read a word; the next day it was as if he had never seen it before. Our most experienced teachers tried every strategy that worked for other students, yet nothing stuck. But James wasn't unique in our school; his lack of progress was still striking.

We were frustrated, but yet still determined to learn because that's what was required of us. We didn't know enough at that time about dyslexia. We didn't know enough about learning disabilities and how students like James actually learn to read, which is through systemic and sequential approaches which lead to greater reading fluency.

Furthermore, we realized later that it is far easier to build foundational skills early rather than remediate them later. That's the insight behind universal screening: catch risk early; teach differently and do it sooner.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read report makes this clear: learning to read is a human right and systems must use evidence-based instruction, universal screening and timely intervention to fulfill that right equitably. LRSD fully supports this position and Bill 225's role in advancing it.

This is not a philosophical debate; it is an equity imperative. Screening ensures every child is seen through the same lens, reducing bias and opening doors for all, especially those least well served by traditional approaches.

Bill 225 also operationalizes this stance. Two screenings annually, using minister-approved tools, and I would encourage that the committee consider adding the term evidence-based tools to this bill. It ensures timely results for families, and here I would encourage the committee to consider more thought on the 30-day limitation, as this sounds easy, but working in a system trying to make that mandate happen, there are several logistical barriers to that type of turn-around for schools and systems, especially if this is their first attempt at trying to implement screening.

And targeted resources, which I would encourage further discussion on identifying shared responsibilities for financing those supports rather than simply saying school boards will allocate resources. Those resources are finite, and this is a collective effort that requires the support of multiple stakeholders. That sequence of screen, share, support will turn information into action, I have no doubt.

Why is this essential now? It's because the consequences of waiting are real. The Right to Read report in Ontario has documented what many of us have seen here and heard this evening. When students don't get early explicit instruction and timely intervention, the gaps widen. Self-esteem drops and mental health ultimately suffers into adolescence and on to adulthood.

Too many children internalize the idea, I'm not good enough, long before grade 3. Universal screening helps us change strategies in teaching much earlier before that painful conclusion takes root. In LRSD, screening gives us, the professionals, a shared objective language about foundational skills. When a student misses a benchmark, we don't label that child; we change our instructional approach. We adjust whole-class teaching, add small-group supports, monitor progress closely and collaborate with specialists and especially our clinicians.

That's how you make tier 1 instruction strong to reduce the need for support; tier 2 support more targeted to reduce the need for more intensive interventions; and tier 3 interventions more limited but also more impactful, because it is reserved only for those who truly require it.

Screening also demands a multi-disciplinary response: educators, families, clinicians and health

professionals working from the same early signals. We are fortunate in Manitoba to have examples to learn from that have created momentum for this action from across our country. Ontario and New Brunswick require annual screenings in K to 2. British Columbia is investing \$30 million to expand screening and teacher training. Alberta has developed universal early screening and collection tools with researchers, for both literacy and numeracy.

Manitoba's pilot begins this fall with full implementation in 2026, and position statements in favour of universal screening and evidence-based practice in classrooms have been developed by the Manitoba Pediatric Society and the Manitoba Association of School Psychologists, among many other organizations and relevant stakeholders.

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission report will be released at the end of this month, and Bill 225 builds on this momentum and enshrines these expectations province-wide regardless of who forms the government.

For a moment, let me briefly return to the classroom to emphasize a crucial point. Today, in any kindergarten room, students quickly figure out who can do what the teacher asks and who cannot. This realization hardens into, I'm not good at this, with surprising speed.

Over time, this impact compounds, and as you've heard many times this evening, research confirms that adolescents and adults with learning disabilities face significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression. That's why this is important. That's why I'm here. That's what 'motivated' me to get started on this journey.

Universal screening, followed by responsive teaching, interrupts that story very early on when it is most impactful.

Manitoba teachers continue to do fantastic work in our classrooms every single day and are truly dedicated professionals. Teachers know their students well. However, perceptions are not the same as standardized, reliable and valid indicators. Screening equips teachers to target instruction with confidence and show growth to families. This serves everyone's needs and enhances trusting relationships between schools and families.

* (21:30)

But screening isn't just an education project; it demands a multidisciplinary response. Results should be shared with families to build genuine partnerships, school psychologists and speech-language pathologists

need to be available to help interpret patterns across multiple screenings, and pediatricians can reinforce the impacts and the efforts to do early identification.

And so what does this require? It requires high quality, evidence-based tools with clear benchmarks; simple, ethical and accessible data-collection and reporting tools; professional learning coupled with research-based resources, so teachers can act on data; family partnerships that offer timely and plain-language results; and multidisciplinary partnerships and access to clinical pathways for persistent risk.

In closing, Bill 225 is more than policy. It is a commitment: a commitment to collectively supporting evidence-based practices, to sharing clear information with parents and most importantly, to using that information so no child leaves school seeing themselves as anything less than capable.

On behalf of the Louis Riel School Division, I urge the committee to advance Bill 225 and to pair it with strong recommendations for investments in training, evidence- and research-based tools, data literacy and a multidisciplinary group of supports that make the promise of this bill a reality.

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Cadez.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you so much for your presentation, and just your support for the legislation to progress, as well as for taking the lead with Louis Riel School Division—yourself and the entire school division—in really showing Manitoba that it is in fact possible, we can be doing better here.

I have taken a note of what you have shared with the idea to add an amendment, the word specifically evidence-based tool. It's something that we can certainly discuss, and I don't see an issue with that. And I just want to appreciate you highlighting that it's very important that it is legislated, it's made official here in the province, not just sent out in a press release.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Mr. Cadez, would you like to respond?

R. Cadez: Yes, I think that the idea of evidence-based tools is an important one. It's one that's misunderstood often, and even amongst professionals, but it does have a specific meaning. So in implementing and understand that commits us to something very specific, and spreading the understanding of what that actually means is an important part of this process. So I'd

appreciate if that was added. That would make this much stronger, for sure.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mr. Blashko: Thank you so much for being here. I was one of your students, but not in grade 3. But I appreciate everything you did to support me and all your students, and you continue to support the education community.

But I'm curious: it sounds like Louis Riel has been on this journey of, like, kind of questioning the pedagogical practices and tools that you're using, maybe for years before others—other school divisions are considering it. I'm curious, was there—like, what was the initiating factor to that? Was there a champion within the school division. Was it, like parental and guardian involvement? Like, what kind of—what led to that change and those questions being asked?

R. Cadez: Thanks for the question. In my case, it led to—we led ourself down a path to doing screening and changing some of the instructional practices because of students like James. I had some staff at a school where I was the principal who got really frustrated when they could not see progress in the student. We had implemented certain strategies that had shown tremendous success, but there were still some students that we could not support, and we didn't understand why.

And so this led us down a path to understanding the research. From there a collective group of us started consulting with folks, experts in the field in Manitoba and beyond, and we've gotten a very close partnership with a team of researchers at McGill University, the University of Toronto, who have really helped guide us along the way, and we've done a lot of learning and have a lot more learning to do.

And so that's the journey that as a school system we've decided to go on. What I do know is that once we started making changes to how we saw things and how we did things, we noticed differences in the classroom, and the students that were disengaged and no longer part of their programming became much more enthusiastic about it quite quickly, as early as kindergarten. You can see it immediately.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for your presentation. Some of the other presenters tonight have touched on the importance of teaching the teachers when it comes to implementing these measures. So what do you do in LRSD in terms of professional development and supporting your staff to deliver this kind of learning?

R. Cadez: Thank you.

Learning for the professional staff is a journey. The screening—I refer to the screening oftentimes as the low-hanging fruit. This is the easy step. You have the data; now you have to act. And it's often misunderstood, and teachers are used to seeing—things like a screening tool, they see it as an assessment. It's not an assessment; it's a screening tool. It's meant to identify risk; it's not there to measure the success, necessarily, of the student.

And so we have to first get our understanding of what it is that we're using these tools for. Then the second part is we try to teach our staff what each of the measures we use is actually identifying.

And so over the last five years, we've developed a more comprehensive approach to professional development, where we have a couple of people dedicated to working together and bringing the pedagogy into the classroom in a much more job-embedded approach. And we've developed a lot of resources as a system, in consultation with those teachers and with professionals, to make sure that we are promoting evidence-based practices.

Our goal is to show teachers what the best practices are and we do our best to implement them. I don't want to leave you with the impression that everything is all rosy in Louis Riel; we are on a journey. And it's a long journey, and we have a long way to go yet, but I'm very happy with the steps that we've taken on that journey so far.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation today, Mr. Cadez, and we are out of time. *[interjection]*

Okay, is there leave for MLA Cross to ask one more question? *[Agreed]*

MLA Cross: Thank you for coming. I'm very proud to be an LRSD teacher on leave and having worked with you.

I have a question. You mentioned that you had a concern regarding the 30-day limitation clause that's in here. Could you elaborate a little bit more, maybe suggest what it should look like, why it could be a potential pitfall, because maybe that's something we need to amend.

R. Cadez: I got a phone call this summer from the department of education in BC asking us about how we're collecting the screening data and creating reports for it, because it's a big problem. To collect the data is its own adventure; to have the data in the hands of the teachers is another adventure; to bring it back to the

parents is something I still have not figured out yet how to do.

It's a complicated process. In Ontario, they have a report card check box: would say the student was screened, hit all the benchmarks or did not. I believe it's something along those lines. But I can't change the report card; that's a provincial tool. So some support, I guess, from the Province in direction as to what that reporting looks like.

This other part that you'll want to consider is, if everybody's using different tools that are not as we've described them this evening, it can be kind of messy as to what we're actually reporting back. And the other part of that is we want to equip teachers with the right understanding of what those results mean, so they can have informed conversations in student-progress conferences or meetings with parents moving forward. I would not want this to be something that causes greater confusion among the parent community.

Parents must know what these results are, but we must also collectively understand what they mean.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Cadez, for your time tonight.

Next up, we'll have Ms. Stormi Thompson. Okay. Thank you.

Josee Adrian? Okay, Josee will check it online—okay, they are dropped to the bottom of the list.

Ms. Jeanne Hudek?

Dr. Darja Barr?

Michelle Depner? Michelle Depner is online.

* (21:40)

Michelle, on you online right now? Michelle, once you get your video and audio on, we can begin your presentation.

Michelle Depner (Private Citizen): All right. Can you see my video now?

Good evening, everyone. My name's Michelle Depner and I'm joining tonight from rural Manitoba on Treaty 2 lands, the traditional lands of Dakota, Ojibway and Anishinabe peoples and homeland of the Métis nation.

I'm speaking tonight in support of Bill 225, as a parent of three enthusiastic, creative and clever young children, who are now thankfully sleeping.

My eight-year-old son, Kellan, has always loved being read to, exploring pictures and books and trips

to our local library. He's like a moth to a flame when a story's being read. As a parent, I was so excited when Kellan started grade 1, as I naively thought that this is where he would unlock his ability to read and fall in love with books in a whole new way.

He came home in September of his first grade year, bursting with secret stories of how letter sounds worked and with a shiny new home reading bag full of books.

As months marched on, those early reading texts were no longer exciting. They were becoming a source of frustration, dread and tears in our home.

His grade 1 teacher connected with us in May and asked a salient question: Do you have a family history of dyslexia? She shared with us that despite Kellan scoring well on the screening tools available to her in that school, assessments and on his report card, she was concerned with this progress. She encouraged us to seek a psychoeducational assessment through the school and those efforts were met with a message of, oh, he's so young; let's just wait and see; he'll—like, when he's in grade 3 we can assess him for a learning disability.

Seeing how Kellan's confidence and self-esteem had eroded so rapidly in just one year, the idea of waiting another two years for assessment and support didn't seem like a good idea.

Our financial privilege afforded us the opportunity to pay for private psychoeducational assessment when Kellan was six years old to confirm his diagnosis of dyslexia and dysgraphia. His early diagnosis and intervention are a result of a caring and informed educator, privilege and luck. Universal screening would stop leaving our children's literacy education up to luck and privilege.

As parents, we immersed ourselves in the literature on dyslexia, reading instruction, evidence-based interventions and best practices. We learned that dyslexia can be reliably diagnosed in kids as young as age 5, and when diagnosed early and interventions are in place early, kids do better.

We also learned in terms of reading instruction what works for kids with dyslexia also works really well for the whole classroom. We found community in other families parenting children with dyslexia and have learned from our peers.

We were acquiring this knowledge just as our daughter Harper entered kindergarten. We started that year with informed questions to our school and were

met with discouraging answers. We started that year knowing that while some screening is set to be done in kindergarten, but no, it wasn't with the tools that we had learned were consistent with best practice, and there was not really a process in place for sharing the screening results with parents. This demonstrated to us that the school needs help selecting evidence-based screening tools.

Bill 225 is important to our family. I asked Kellan today what he would like to share with this committee, and he said to me, ask them to look for dyslexia in kindergarten. Don't leave us struggling alone for so long. Universal screening is an opportunity for Benny, my youngest son, to have a literacy experience in school that is better than his brother and his sister's.

We have been fortunate to have crossed paths with so many great educators who truly have the best interests of our children in their hearts, minds and classrooms. Our children, families and educators need legislation for universal screening for learning disabilities that recommends specific tools based on best practice and has processes built in to strengthen communication and partnership between the classroom and home.

Screening opens doors to the next steps for further improvement at the level of the classroom, school, district and province. I would appreciate your support in moving Bill 225 forward to enhance the future literacy for my family and for all families in Manitoba.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Depner.

MLA Lamoureux: I'd like to thank you for your virtual presentation here this evening. And more of just a comment: I appreciate your son's recommendations. It's always nice to hear directly from children who are—and even when they're not—having the same experiences, because who knows better than the children who are actually going through the school system right now as we speak.

I also appreciate you speaking to the importance of why we need to have tools that are regulated and are consistent so that whether it be teachers who are implementing the tools or parents who are receiving the feedback from what is being implemented, it allows for everyone to be on the same page with information being shared. So thank you for your presentation.

The Chairperson: Ms. Depner, would you like to respond?

M. Depner: Yes, thank you for the opportunity to be here this evening; I appreciate it.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

MLA Dela Cruz: Michelle, thank you very much for your presentation tonight, and thank you for—I guess I'll speak to the camera over here; we're looking at the screen—thank you for sticking around even while your little ones are fast asleep. They're very lucky to have you and we're very lucky to have heard your perspective on this bill.

The Chairperson: Ms. Depner, would you like to respond?

M. Depner: It is a long and difficult road, I think, as many people have shared tonight. And so that recognition means a lot.

Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: Hi, Michelle. Thank you very much for taking time to share your story with the committee tonight. I know it's late, so we appreciate it.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. Depner?

Are there any further questions? Thank you so much for your time this evening, Ms. Depner.

Next we have Mrs. Brianna Neufeld.

We also have Mrs. Alicia Smith. That name will be dropped to the bottom again.

Michelle Ward? Thank you, Ms. Ward. You can go ahead with your presentation.

Michelle Ward (Private Citizen): Good evening, and thank you for hearing us all this evening. I haven't even started yet—sorry.

When I applied to present today, I had the option to submit a letter instead of speaking. I chose to speak even though it's difficult for me, because not everyone could easily read a letter. A person with dyslexia or another print-based learning disability might be able to sound out the words, but that doesn't mean that they can fully understand what they've read, and that's exactly why we're here today: because everyone deserves the right to read and to comprehend.

I have an 11-year-old daughter, Cece now in grade 6. She is smart, creative, funny and active. In grade 1, we started noticing that something wasn't quite right academically, but it was during COVID and when we asked about her reading and writing, we were told: it's normal, and don't worry; it will come.

Grades 1 and 2 went by. She was in a reading group, but there was no assessments or conversations about her struggles. When we asked again, we heard the same reassurance: don't worry, it will come.

* (21:50)

In grade 3 the workload increased, and Cece started finding ways to cope so no one would notice. She copied classmates, guessed words from pictures and used her intuition to get by. These strategies helped her stay unnoticed but created tensions with friends who thought she was just lazy.

One day she had to write her name on the board and misspelled it, flipping two letters. Another student called it out, and she felt humiliated. How, she thought, could she spell her own name wrong in grade 3? That October we were lucky enough to have Dr. Valdine Björnson, a certified reading clinician, working at our school. She suggested Cece needed an assessment and was put forward to the school psychologist. But Cece stayed on that assessment list for the rest of grade 3, and it never happened.

We watched our once confident, outgoing child lose her spark. Finally, we decided to have her assessed privately that summer before grade 4. The assessment cost over \$2,500, something that we are fortunate and privileged to be able to afford, but many other families can't.

Over the past few years we've watched her confidence fade. Research shows that children who go undiagnosed beyond age eight are at much higher risk for anxiety and depression. Cece was diagnosed at nine and a half.

Honestly, if she knew that I was here today talking about her dyslexia, she'd want the ground to open up and swallow her whole. As much as we try to convince her—sorry—that her brain works differently, that dyslexia gives her creativity and insight, she doesn't see that. She just feels different. She's the kid who's pulled from class for support, the one with the different-looking worksheet, the one who goes to tutoring while others get to go home after school and relax.

Cece attends Laidlaw School, where a friend of mine sons are also students. One is a year—one is a couple of years older; one is one year younger. When her sons were in grades 1 and 2, the school approached her, and they said that her children might have dyslexia and offered assessments. Both were tested, and neither had a learning disability.

My question is: How were those two children flagged and assessed so quickly while my daughter, who actually has dyslexia, was not? This is why universal screening is essential. Every child deserves the same opportunity to be screened in the same evidence-based way. It shouldn't depend on who their teacher or support staff happens to be.

Had Cece been screened earlier, I can't help but wonder who she would be today. Some might ask what's the difference between diagnosed at age six versus age nine? The difference is enormous. Those are the formative years when reading intervention is most effective.

Cece told me recently that her brain is a dumb-dumb. She asked, if I'm so smart, why do I need so much tutoring? We keep reminding her that her brain is just wired differently; that the late diagnosis has left its mark. The lack of confidence and the constant feeling of being different has spilled over into every part of her life. She's an incredible violinist, a great soccer player and a talented artist, but she doesn't see any of that. In her mind, if she's not good at reading, writing or math, she can't be good at anything else. And watching kind of self doubt take hold of your child is heartbreaking.

So while it's too late for universal screening to help my child, I'm here to advocate for the ones who are coming after her, for the children who, like Cece, may be hiding their learning struggles because they don't want to be seen as different. They deserve to—right to learn and to succeed, not slip through the cracks, retreat into the shadows or act out just to avoid feeling stupid. And this is why Bill 225 matters.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Ward, for sharing your story so openly and honestly with us. Thank you.

Questions?

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for your advocacy here this evening. I'm very grateful that you chose to speak this evening and not only submitted a written presentation, but chose to be here in person and show your vulnerability to us. It truly is what's going to allow this legislation to, hopefully, move forward. It shows the government just how important it is, and my hope is that one day you'll be able to share these transcripts with Cece and she'll see how incredibly smart and talented and athletic she truly is and how strong her mom is for going to bat for her.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Would you like to respond?

M. Ward: Thank you for that.

MLA Cross: It's not a question. I just want to thank you for sharing your daughter's story, and I think she's a really lucky girl to have you on her side, and she needs that. And I'm really sorry for what you've gone through. I've seen it as a teacher, been that teacher who hasn't been allowed to say anything, and I've pulled the parents to the side and I go, I'm not supposed to say this, but I'm telling you anyways, because we have to do that; let's be honest.

So thank you for advocating for others and don't stop advocating for your daughter.

M. Ward: Yes, thank you. I did have to ask if a teacher or if anybody would consider it to be dyslexia, and we weren't really pushed in that direction until we had somebody say to us that, yes. But we had to ask the question outright.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for coming tonight. That can't have been easy. As a parent I felt that. And you touched on a couple of really important points and you reinforced points that I think Dr. Pagura made and Mrs. Voort from Dyslexia Canada about the impact of intervention earlier rather than later.

So I just—I want you to know that your presentation tonight makes a difference and will impact what happens here tonight. So thank you.

M. Ward: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation tonight.

Next up is Ms. Valdine Bjornson. Please go ahead with your presentation.

Valdine Bjornson (Manitoba Teachers for Students with Learning Disabilities): Thank you so much.

Wow. What a night, on dyslexia awareness day. What a celebration for everyone. It's been emotional for me. Sorry, I didn't expect to get teary here, but I will be doing that, I guess.

This has been a long journey for me. I come here first and foremost as a mom, a mom who has been impacted with dyslexia, ADHD as well. And thus began my stubborn journey to understand dyslexia.

I'm going to be speaking to you more on a professional side, but I can tell you all the learning that I've done over the years is because of my children and the frustration that I've had with my own profession as a

reading clinician. I was very disappointed with just the lack of curiosity about dyslexia and the impact that we have on our students with effective literacy skills. I was really pursuing a better way to do things, and for a while that was not happening in our schools. I do think that there are really great things happening now.

So just as a background for me, I work in several schools in a public school division in Winnipeg as a literacy specialist. I am a certified reading clinician. I work at the University of Manitoba as a reading specialist with the Indigenous Student Centre as well, so I work with kindergarten students all the way up to adult students currently.

I also work with teachers across Canada to support their understanding and responses to those with dyslexia with structured literacy. I also am the president and the founder of the Manitoba Teachers for Students with Learning Disabilities, including dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. This group is a special area group of educators with the Manitoba Teachers Society. We have had hundreds of teachers every year attend our MTS PD day event, which focuses on PD for those with dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia.

* (22:00)

Teachers want to know about LD. And when the question came up about this universal screening and changing it to something else, I believe very strongly that you should have those terms, learning disabilities, in the screen. Because one of the issues is, what has been mentioned earlier, is, as an educator, I'm still recently have been told that I should not be using dyslexia learning disabilities. So I do believe strongly that that term should be stuck with this universal screening initiative.

And teachers also want to do the best that they can for every student that they encounter. Having a universal screener early on will support teachers' work in schools, as prevention and being proactive is by far more effective than responding to the issues beyond grade 3, as you've heard repeatedly here.

I also completed a doctor of education through the University of Calgary, based on adults with dyslexia in Manitoba. It was in the language and literacy department of the faculty of education, and every single assignment that I did, I stubbornly, again, used dyslexia as a topic. Because traditionally the language and literacy departments of the faculty of education do not really discuss or bring forward learning disabilities or dyslexia.

And I have to add here—this is off script—but the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg both have professors that are studying reading disabilities, and I do find it really curious that the faculties of education do not reach out to them to understand and learn from those experts.

So my doctoral study focused on adults with dyslexia, and I listened to the participants' stories and was inspired by their journeys. Half of my participants did not have a diagnosis until they reached adulthood. They had decades of pain and carried shame by assuming that they were stupid. And those were the words that they used with me. And you can imagine how heartbreaking that was for me to hear that.

This is a word that I heard by several of the participants. The participants who did not have a diagnosis until adulthood were scarred. They cried with me as they shared their stories. They were angry at a system that did not know what to do. In fact, those who had received the diagnosis of dyslexia in the K-to-12 system were exactly the opposite. They were self-accepting.

They had developed an understanding early on and had learned to embrace and appreciate their identity. They were not emotional when they shared their life journey. They were proud of their accomplishments because of and despite some of their struggles.

Most of those who had got a K-to-12 diagnosis did so at the advocacy of their parents. This should not be on the families' shoulders. Schools should provide universal literacy screeners for LD for that specific reason: to avoid the years of struggle, shame and misunderstanding of their skills and challenges. Earlier is better.

If we have a universal screener of learning disabilities, it needs to be efficient, based on thorough understanding of the best skills to test, and teacher friendly. We need to support teachers with time to understand the purpose of screeners. We need teachers to be provided training with dyslexia and LD. And, like, a simple example is New York City schools actually require all teachers to take a free, online, one-hour training session to learn about dyslexia.

This is not too complicated. We can do this. There's lots of materials out there that are from reputable sources, that many, many schools, and actually departments of education, implement in the United States. So if we are looking for better ways to do things, we could also look to those resources.

Teachers need to be provided PD to respond to students with LD.

Responses to our universal screeners do not need to be complicated, time consuming. We can achieve equity by responding to the universal screener data with explicit, direct instruction tailored to students for pacing and broad literacy skills early on. And this is the key. Currently one of the things that I'm doing in the schools that I'm in is insisting that I work in a kindergarten classroom and a grade 1 classroom. This is when the difference can be made, and it's so much more effective in K and 1.

University literacy screeners would benefit all students, but of course specifically those with dyslexia. In schools, we need to have specific literacy specialists—and this is a big one for me—who have protected time to work only on the development of literacy skills. Too often what I see in schools is, we have a screener possibly, but then this is left for the student service teachers, and they do not have the time nor the capacity nor the protection of their time to work with literacy. So I do think that's a really big piece.

We need to have funding to ensure that all Manitobans have literate skills which support their ability to proceed in life, so that they start school with confidence, which carries them through a lifetime of productive and happy lives.

For example, Dr. Linda Siegel of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, who was a consultant for them, for the right to read, has spent a lifetime studying those who have fallen through the cracks in our system, undiagnosed, misunderstood individuals with dyslexia. There are dire consequences.

Universal screeners are not used to diagnose. Screeners are used to identify students early: those who are at risk, those who are approaching, those who might need a different pace for instruction. It provides an efficient way to identify and then respond—this is the big piece—when it matters the most: early on. We can use—we can then use the terms LD early on to create equity sooner because of this universal early screening for learning disabilities. This is the important part; that term is really essential.

And I do really—I'm very, very excited to be here in terms of this initiative. This has been—I would say, you know, I'm standing on the shoulders of also giants who have been advocates for dyslexia for decades. So this is not just like a couple of years old; this is decades of work that are people that aren't even in this

room, who I could name, that have been working for advocacy for dyslexia for years.

And in—just in closing, some schools continue to avoid the terms LD: dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. And on this day of dyslexia awareness, above all, universal screeners in Manitoba schools will allow educators to start saying learning disabilities, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia. There is power in neurodiversity. There is power in knowing who you are, understanding early your uniqueness. As the participants in my doctoral study can attest, understanding one own self is a journey and learning about LD is a gift because LD students and LD individuals are incredible.

Thank you very much for your time, and I really appreciate all the people that have spoke before me. I was thinking while I was hearing everybody, I really have nothing to say based on what they've already said before me. So I appreciate your time, and I really do applaud all the initiatives that are happening here tonight.

Thank you so much.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Bjornson.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for sharing a bit about your journey. And you used the term stubbornness, and I really interpret it as passion. I see what you're bringing to the table, and I believe you brought even more information, new information, to the table, so I'm glad you stuck around to present.

I've made a note of the importance of the term learning, specifically, disabilities, to ensure that it remains in the legislation.

And I just want to say that I'm very grateful for the work that you're doing in our schools right now as a literacy specialist and for insisting the—in the younger grades. We know how important this is for equity and ensuring that there are results coming as well.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. Bjornson, would you like to respond?

V. Bjornson: Well, I am really just grateful for your initiative in this, and, yes, the early years is where it—we really need to start. The gaps are harder to close as students get older, so early literacy is really the piece that's most important.

Mr. Blashko: Thank you so much. And it wasn't like central to what you've shared, but it's been alluded to a couple of times, maybe like gendered experiences of

either being assessed or not assessed and kind of like the—lifepath afterwards. I'm wondering if you find that there is, like, different experiences based on gender in both, like, kind of that pre-screening, like, obviously, hopefully, this universal screening will address this, but I'm curious, like, through your research or either through your day-to-day life in schools?

V. Bjornson: That's an interesting question.

I would say if, okay, so, traditionally, I think what we assumed was that boys or—would be looked at sooner based on the fact that they usually were a little bit more active. Is that what you're referring to? So—and then girls would more, like, fall back, kind of be quiet in the back of the room and just had that social sense to just kind of tuck it away, like you've also heard here earlier.

But no, yes; there's really no gender difference in terms of the frequency or, yes, the way it's presented in that sense, but it does—it has been more traditionally thought to be more prevalent. And I would say that, you know, I—one of my participants said that they didn't even want to come to school but they had the only piece that they could actually, I guess, overcome some of their difficulties was being on a volleyball team and their coach insisting that they show up. So athleticism and things like that can be a really great—or music programs, you know, art programs, those kinds of things.

So I don't know if it's really on a gender line anymore; it's more about trying to find different ways for those individuals to kind of shine. Yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Bjornson.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for your presentation. I was taking a ton of notes.

* (22:10)

Quick two-part question: Why is it important that we use the right language—learning disabilities, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia—and why would some institutions want to avoid that? In your estimation—maybe you don't have the real answer. But I'm curious as to your thoughts.

V. Bjornson: Okay. It's important because of what I said, and I think you've heard it a little bit here, that schools—some schools—are not really in favour of using the terms still. And I think, given dyslexia awareness day, it's kind of ironic that that's what we're testifying to here today.

I think the reason that there's a bit of an avoidance, if I can kind of just make a guesstimate, is that, you know, we don't want to be seen as teachers diagnosing. And so there's a sensitivity there for, you know, a teacher to say: Oh, I think it possibly is dyslexia. But I think that's where a lot of the information that we've been sharing here—you have valid testing screeners that will be reliable and going to be based on evidence—will be something that I can say the screener, according to its numbers that it's showing, that there is a risk for.

So then it kind of takes care of the information that I may be sharing because it's going to be taken care of through the screener. So it wouldn't be me saying it; it would be the screening tool that kind of suggests that.

So yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation.

Ms. Angela Yaskiw?

Mr. Marko Bebek?

Ms. Sherri Penner?

Okay, Ms. Sherri Penner will drop to the bottom of the list, as well as Marko Bebek and Angela Yaskiw.

Allison Guercio? Please go ahead with your presentation.

Allison Guercio (Private Citizen): I'm just going to preload with some Kleenex, okay?

Thank you. It's been a long night. Hopefully my tears and message will make you—I don't know—feel guilty, feel bad for me—I'm not sure.

My name is Allison Guercio, and I'm the parent of an 11-year-old boy named Coen who's currently in grade 7. Wow.

I'm speaking today not only as a parent but as an undiagnosed dyslexic who's watched with deep pain my bright and curious child slowly lose confidence, self-esteem and the joy of learning, not because of the lack of potential but because early assessment and the support they need in school is simply not there.

I'm undiagnosed because the almost \$3,000 that it would cost me to be assessed I've now invested in my child for private tutoring in addition—more than that, only because he's misunderstood in the current school system.

Coen is a kind, compassionate child who loves to learn. He enjoys math, science and loves basketball. Although he struggles with reading, it's something he truly enjoys. I'm not sure where he got this from, but he's a deeply emotional child who feels things intensely and connects easily and genuinely with those around him.

At the start of grade 1, I noticed that his reading was more about guessing than having the proper skills to decode the words. When I brought this up to his teacher, I was told that he was a boy, that they're often delayed compared to girls and that we need to simply read more with him at home.

These comments were frustrating as we read every day to him and with him, with no change. We again spoke to teachers—to other teachers in other years and were told that there wasn't an issue because he was kind and he listened in class and he didn't cause problems in the classroom.

I knew that my child was struggling, and it if wasn't for me noticing his challenges and recalling my own as a child, he would still be undiagnosed and have no appropriate interventions.

Finally, at the end of grade 3, I insisted that the school involve the divisional psychologist for an assessment. They told me it would be an—at least a two-year wait, and that it was best to look into private options. This was frustrating to hear, as we had advocated for three years only to find out that we would have to wait two more years.

We knew we couldn't wait this long, as the gap for his reading compared to his peers was widening with each month. We could see that going without an assessment and diagnosis was taking its toll on his self-worth and confidence, and we couldn't wait until middle school. We were fortunate to be able to afford a private assessment, but many families can't or aren't even aware that their kids are in need of that.

By this time, Coen was really struggling and it impacted his self-esteem. He would get so frustrated when he had to read or write that he would become extremely upset and said that he was bad at everything and that he was stupid.

It was a challenge each day after school, and some days still is. As he didn't have a diagnosis, he didn't receive any structured literacy instruction at school and instead was using pictures to guess what each page was about. In addition, he was to memorize sight words and do spelling tests, which he would always get 100 per cent on, but a week later—a week later

would never be able to spell the words correctly. It was pure memorization.

His extended time with single reading levels while witnessing classmates advance continued to diminish his self-esteem, week by week. Universal screening would have prevented much of this. When kids are identified early, there is a narrower gap to close between them and their peers, and therefore, early interventions and teaching techniques can be applied to bring them to grade-level reading sooner. This is why universal screening is a benefit for all students. It identifies students early, and therefore, schools will be able to use the resources to help kids that need it effectively and apply it all the same.

I also will echo some—this is obviously off script—but it also needs government funding to ensure that those resources are there and available. It's some—it's much beyond this bill.

Finally, I said—as I said before, it prevents the negative self-worth that's associated with being identified late and having to catch up on what seems to be an impossible task.

We have spent over two—\$20,000 on private interventions because the school system didn't have the assessment tools or resources to help him. I know how fortunate Coen is to have the—to have had these interventions and continue with an intervention to narrow the gap between him and his peers in literacy. Many children and families are not in this position where they can buy extra resources, supports the schools are not providing.

Although Coen has had tremendous teachers, all of them admit they aren't trained in evidence-based reading instruction and being able to screen children for reading difficulties. The emotional and financial strain of our—on our entire family is extensive. To watch your child cry and worry about being behind his peers in class, yet all the same time being frustrated with not being challenged because he's intelligent, and he says he thinks the teacher—or, that teachers think he's dumb as they keep giving him the same reading level because they're evaluating him with a non-evidence-based approach.

His older sister also carries the burden of ensuring people treat him fairly and advocate for him. This isn't something that any family should have to go through, especially when it's preventable. Learning to read is a basic human right.

I am asking you to pass Bill 225 to ensure that students identified at risk are not only assessed by—but

guaranteed access to specialized supports and resources, which is crucial for students with dyslexia and other reading challenges. Universal screening will ensure that no child is overlooked.

* (22:20)

I—this is also off script—but this is a big step. If this bill is passed, the other piece I do worry about is, as a child, my child has been diagnosed, but there are many others that will be not captured in this, that will still be feeling horrible, you know, about themselves and their abilities. So I do, you know, encourage—I'm not sure if there could be something considered to also capture kids that were missing, like, a decade of people that, if we're starting in grade—kindergarten to grade 3 say, next year, we're missing all those kids that are maybe in high school that don't know.

The countless tears and frustration, advocacy for interventions and adaptations we've gone through can't be changed. However, with your help, we can ensure that no other child loses their chance to read, learn and believe in themselves. Please stand with us and with every child in Manitoba.

Thank you for listening to our—to my family's story and using your voice to help protect the rights of every child. I have—am I allowed to share audio from my son?

No? I'm not? Okay. That's fine.

An Honourable Member: You can say it.

A. Guercio: Yes. I could listen to it and read it out, like, say it, but I don't know that that's impactful.

The importance of this bill validates children's struggles to implement appropriate interventions. Small changes do make a difference, and I think this is more than a small change.

After my day—my son's day that started at 6:30 to do tutoring for an hour before going to school, then off to basketball, he was thrilled to go and see the Provencher Bridge, the Richardson Building and the Winnipeg sign all lit up in red today. Things like this make a difference and validate what him and others are going through.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Guercio. Am I pronouncing that right, before I continue on?

A. Guercio: It's Guercio.

The Chairperson: Guercio. I'm going to change that. Thank you.

Thank you for your presentation.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you so much for your presentation and being here this evening and sharing a bit about you and your family and just the journey that you've gone on.

I agree. Education, reading, it should be a basic, fundamental human right all over Canada. For today's purposes here in Manitoba, we need to be doing better, and we need to ensure that it is not only affordable but accessible. Right now it's not. People are paying thousands of dollars for private assessments, private screenings, and that's—I'm glad that children are getting that, but it's not fair for all the other children who aren't getting it.

We need to ensure that every single child in school here in Manitoba has that access.

My question for you is, like other parents have spoken to, did you share with Coen about this legislation, and what he had to say?

A. Guercio: Yes. He's probably not going to bed and watching me blubber on.

Yes, he's—he knows dyslexia is a superpower. That's how we treat it in our household. But it comes with many struggles. But he's—he did say to me before I left, you got this, Mom, and please make a difference for other kids.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you, Mrs.—

A. Guercio: Guercio.

MLA Schmidt: Guercio, thank you very much for helping me there.

Thank you very much for sharing your experience and your heart and your emotions with us tonight. I don't think you need to be embarrassed about that. I—we welcome it, and, like, thank you. It takes a lot of courage to do that.

I wanted to just quickly thank you very much for your suggestion about—I'm going to call it sort of like a retroactive application. I don't know if that's the right way to sort of term it, but I think that's a very interesting suggestion, and one that we'll be happy to take forward and consider in our discussions with school divisions and how to properly roll this out, and make sure it's as comprehensive and universal as we can.

You asked us to stand with you. We do stand with you. We agree with you that universal screening will prevent these experiences, and that's really what we're all here to do today. But I think it's also important to

remember that the intention of universal screening tools is also to identify other barriers, right? Like, dyslexia and specific learning disabilities are one barrier, but there are other barriers that children experience in the classrooms.

And you had made a comment about much beyond this bill, and I just wanted to say we agree with you so much; that's why our government is investing in small class sizes. We're investing in a nutrition program. We're hiring teachers, we're making sure there's more one-on-one time in classrooms—

The Chairperson: Minister Schmidt. Minister Schmidt, we're at 45 seconds, unfortunately.

Ms. Guercio, would you like to respond?

A. Guercio: I'm encouraged with all of those things.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for coming tonight and making that presentation.

I think you demonstrated very effectively the impact that this has had on your whole family and the value of this legislation. And you also made a really good point about the cohort of kids that would be missed even if this is implemented and the fact that something needs to be done for them as well.

Thank you.

A. Guercio: No further comment.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation tonight.

Our next presenter is online, and it is Steve Guercio.

Okay, we will remove Steve Guercio from the list.

Next is Mr. Alan Campbell. See if he's online.

Mr. Alan Campbell will be moved to the bottom of the list.

Kim Siwak? She's on Zoom.

Kim, if you can hear me right now, you just need to accept the promotion.

Kim, we will send you one more request for a promotion, and if you accept that, then you'll be able to speak. If you decline, we will take that as a suggestion that you're not wanting to speak.

Okay, Kim, we'll have to move your name to the bottom of the list.

Next up is Angelina Hartwell.

Okay, Angelina Hartwell will go to the bottom of the list.

Fernanda Vallejo? Please go ahead with your presentation.

Fernanda Vallejo (Latinas Manitoba): Okay, so good night, everyone. So my name is Fernanda Vallejo. I'm the founder of Latinas Manitoba, a community group that supports immigrant women and families in Winnipeg through education, empowerment and community connection.

I believe this bill is not only about education; it's about dignity and opportunity. Every child deserves to be seen, understood and supported with respect. When learning difficulties are not recognized, a child can feel lost, different or even less valued. But when teachers notice the signs early, the child can grow with confidence and pride.

For many immigrant families, the school system is new and sometimes confusing. Language barriers and cultural differences can make it harder for parents to communicate or ask for help. Some children might be misunderstood when in the real life they need to find some support.

In our community, there's a lot of bullying, so that's why a lot of parents are coming to me actually saying that they are going to move to another part of the city to find another district because of the situation. So that's one of the main reasons that I believe that universal screening is important. I can give every—it can give every child an equal chance to learn, no matter their background, language or country of origin.

* (22:30)

I also hope this bill encourages schools to work closely with families, teachers, parents and communities to communicate with respect children, to don't feel alone and just included. That's all that I have to say.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Vallejo.

Any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you so much for your presentation, being here this evening. I know it's getting late into the evening, but every presentation really does contribute to how this legislation does, in fact, move forward.

The words that you shared are so important and they really do emphasize the importance of why we need to ensure every single child is screened, they're screened with a universal evidence-based screening to ensure that they can move forward in our education system, which has ripple effects outside of education into jobs, remaining outside of the judicial system, as we have spoken about. It can affect a child's health moving forward, and I just want to thank you for taking the time to be here.

F. Vallejo: You're welcome. Yes, as a mom of four and as a community leader, I think it's important to bring this topic to the table.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Mrs. Cook: Thank you for sticking around. I know it's late, but I think, you know, you make the point that this is an issue that impacts everybody, right?

And it's—I think early screening is particularly important for kids for whom English is perhaps not their first language, but it is the language of instruction in the classroom, right? And I think—I don't have the evidence to back this up, but I would surmise that we probably miss those diagnoses even more often in kids in that situation, so thank you.

F. Vallejo: Yes, so I hope the government or you guys through you can—they can access some additional help, no? Different languages, I don't know. Find a solution.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Mr. Blashko: Yes, I just want to say thank you for being here. And I know you're really active in your community, so I'm curious: for parents, for guardians who might be, say, navigating screenings or assessments or new conversations with educators, do you—what kind of supports do you think parents might need in navigating these conversations?

F. Vallejo: One of the first ones, and most important, is the language barrier. So maybe we need professionals that can speak our same language. So it won't be difficult, right.

Another solution, well, kids are fast learners. It's not so difficult for them to learn English, French. But, yes, I'm not a professional in this topic, but I just want to bring this to you guys. I'm sure that through you, we can make Manitoba better.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation tonight, Ms. Vallejo.

Next we have Melissa McIntosh, who is on Zoom.

Melissa McIntosh (Private Citizen): Good evening.

The Chairperson: Hi, Melissa. You can go ahead. Thank you so much.

M. McIntosh: Wonderful. You're able to hear me?

The Chairperson: We are, yes.

M. McIntosh: Wonderful. I'm joining you from Clandeboyne, Manitoba tonight. My name is Melissa McIntosh and I'm joining both as a mother to 10-year-old Blaine who has multiple learning disabilities, and I'm also joining you as a professional who's previously worked as a school clinician for over 10 years and now work in the private practice mental health field, running a clinic with supervising five 'other' therapists where we're treating high, high amounts of depression and anxiety, often related to children experiencing learning disability and late diagnosis. So this is something I'm really, really passionate about.

My first introduction to actually undiagnosed and very late diagnosis learning disability is when I was working as a school clinician in an alternative learning environment and doing threat and risk assessments.

And I started to see a theme that students who were in big trouble—come high school, when I read their files and I went back, I was, hmm. And we would often move them on through a quick path to school psychology. And sure enough, they'd come up with a learning disability. And I started to think, how did we miss this? And then I began to learn more about this world.

I never thought that I would be necessarily a mom of this and that's where my real passion had come. So I was someone that knew the system. English is my first language. I actually, in fact, have a master's in education and have studied this field for years and I still was not able to help my own son and advocate in ways that I didn't even know I didn't know yet, because the system was so unprepared for his needs.

So the—where we currently live, Reading Recovery is still the major trend. I have considered moving because 38 kilometres one way or the other would change his experience because those divisions are choosing to use evidence-based screeners, where we are not.

So Blaine is very, very bright. In fact, when he had his school psychology assessment finally, at the end of grade 3, his IQ is in the top 3 per cent of the

world. He is so bright but he has dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADHD.

The school never raised him as an issue one time and they had zero screening tools appropriately, so at kindergarten and grade 1 and grade 2, when I raised him as a concern, I had the same story as many parents have shared today: he's a boy; let's wait and see.

What I did know, though—there was four generations before Blaine: three that—two that had not finished school, and his dad had finished school but very likely had an undiagnosed learning disability.

So with that, and the tiny pieces I had learned as a school clinician, I took on advocacy like many of the parents that have come to speak today. And it was one really skilled reading clinician that tested him, and at the end of grade 2, he knew only six letters of the alphabet, zero sounds and he couldn't write his name.

But with that high IQ, he had a very elaborate system, as mentioned by others today, where he could adapt. He could use the nameplate. He could use the letters in the room. He could use peers. He actually, when we really talked to him about it, had different peers identified with different strengths where he'd go for math and for reading and spelling tests. He had a very elaborate system by grade 2 to cope.

So once we knew he was finally diagnosed and we'd had a reading clinician and a school psychology assessment, my hope was like, yes, we know; here we go.

The Vice-Chairperson in the Chair

And that's the part where I'm absolutely in support of Bill 225 to have the mandated screening, because then we know things. The piece that has been missing for my Blaine is all that follows Bill 225. And so Blaine has had very little structured literacy intervention in school.

So as a very strong advocate and knowing the system and with my privilege and all those pieces that people have talked about today, I have chosen to remove Blaine from school during afternoons so that he can access tutoring multiple times a week.

This obviously impacts him in a broader way, and it is a complicated situation. Living rurally, it also leaves a more complicated situation for us, given that we can't get to places. However, Blaine said something really wise to me this summer, after he has been working with his beloved tutor, Miss G. And he said, you know, Mom, Miss G. is like a really good pitcher

in baseball. She throws really good pitches and I can hit them. And that was so wise.

And what he was referencing is, when Miss G. teaches me in structured and systematic ways that are evidence-based, I get it and I learn and I can hit the ball. And he was talking about reading. And that's a 10-year-old child. He has wisdom far beyond his years, not just because he's bright; unfortunately, because of the trauma that he's experienced in having a learning disability that was never caught at K-1-K, 1 and 2.

And so he has a long way to go and I got to experience one of the very beautiful milestones this summer when he read a stop sign. And I noticed, for the first time, at 10 years old and the end of grade 4, that he could read the word stop.

* (22:40)

And so this bill is so important so that kids like Blaine no longer fall through and they are identified and that parents are no longer told the stories to read more and to wait and see, because we have the tools to know. We must know, and I'm thankful for all of the work and the advocacy that has been done, and I hope for Blaine and for all the kids to come that the stories will change because everyone should have the right to read and write their name with ease.

And the anxiety and depression that comes is treatable but it is a heavy, heavy load for families, and while I get to hold hearts and walk with that every day, I know, just as has been referenced tonight that literacy is actually one of the most effective strategies for digging us out of the mental-health crisis of our children.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. We'll move on to questions from the committee.

MLA Lamoureux: It's been repeated a couple of times now this evening: can't know what we don't know. And I think that's very, very important that we continue to repeat that because it's such a—it's a simple statement but it speaks so, so clearly and it speaks to so much of what's happening right now here in Manitoba.

I want to thank you for highlighting the importance of universal screening and its need to be regulated throughout the province, including in Clandeboyne, Manitoba, and my hope is that this legislation will pass and no one—doesn't matter where you live in Manitoba—will have to question again if they have to move 35 minutes in one direction or the other to

access the resources that another child may have access to.

The Vice-Chairperson: Melissa, if you'd like to respond.

M. McIntosh: Thank you. I think that's paramount and the difference amongst divisions, this is why the legislation is absolutely necessary so that it becomes a mandate and, again, as everyone has spoken to tonight, that the resources follow in terms of training. I appreciated Louis Riel talking about it being a journey and, yes, every division will have their own journey but this is the start of that journey, especially for divisions that have not yet even begun.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you very much, Melissa, for your presentation and your commitment to staying here tonight to speak to this bill. We could not—our government could not agree more with you about the importance of implementing universal early reading screening tools. That's why we did so by ministerial directive. We acted immediately in the spring of 2025. I hope that you are heartened to know that these tools are being implemented and piloted in schools this year. There'll be a full implementation next year so we can catch all these children.

I wanted to talk to you about being a clinician. You mentioned the role of clinicians in making these diagnoses, the role of school psychologists. This bill is silent on the issue of clinicians and, in fact, mandates that teachers perform the screening for learning disabilities. I'd like to hear your comments about that, please.

The Vice-Chairperson: Melissa, if you'd like to respond.

M. McIntosh: Yes, I think it's—I'm a social worker by trade and then moved into kind of a counselling psychology field.

The Chairperson in the Chair

School clinicians are imperative for those higher level assessments and I think it will be necessary that they have an expertise and will be able to support our teachers. As you've heard tonight from many, many parents, like, those resources are pretty, pretty limited. Many of the parents who spoke tonight have had to go private for assessment.

I had, as a parent, a unique situation where we had a reading clinician and then the reading clinician collaborated with the school-based psychologist; so clinicians are absolutely necessary. We've heard—reading clinicians, speech and language, and psychology

and that social work piece in terms of like, all of the systematic pieces and the pieces related to mental health that go along with the learning disability and the systems even outside of the school that families need to support.

And we've heard from folks like that tonight. So clinicians will be part of it. The thing is the clinician will never meet the child unless that screening data is there, so it's kind of like this: if we don't actually ask, we don't even actually know and maybe we're okay. And we're saying, no, that's not okay; like, we need to know.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. McIntosh.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you, Ms. McIntosh, for your presentation. I think it's been really important and powerful for us as members of the committee to hear from families like yours about your experiences.

There are definitely some patterns emerging throughout all of these stories, but each story is still unique. And as a member of this committee, I really value you being here, so thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. McIntosh?

M. McIntosh: Thank you for having me.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Okay, thank you so much for your presentation this evening, Ms. McIntosh.

Next we have Mr. Andy Depner, who is on Zoom.

Andy Depner (Private Citizen): Evening, everyone. How are you today?

The Chairperson: Doing well. Thank you, Mr. Depner. Please go ahead with your presentation.

A. Depner: You guys can see and hear me all right?

The Chairperson: We can, yes, thank you.

A. Depner: Okay. Honourable committee members and fellow advocates, my name is Andy. I'm the proud parent of three enthusiastic and often loud children, and like many parents, I feel like my job as a dad is pretty similar to that of a detective. I'm constantly trying to find the missing pieces of the puzzles. We can figure out where we last left our coat or what happened to our lunch money, and my wife and I have even purchased hundreds of stickers with our kids' names on them to help items come back to us. In fact, I'm sure there's probably a mountain of water bottles hidden somewhere at school or daycare with my family's names stickered all over them.

But sometimes what really gets lost isn't an object; it's a child's confidence. And sometimes, the missing piece of the puzzle isn't that corner piece that we find right away. That missing piece is why we're here today: it's universal literacy screening.

My son, Kellan, is eight years old within the last month. He's an avid chicken farmer of the small flock we have here at home, and he's taken to yelling, chickens assemble, when it's time to feed them.

A few years ago, when Kellan started school, he passed his kindergarten literacy screening. A year later, in grade 1, he was assessed through the Reading Recovery program and was not flagged.

Instead, where our screening tools failed, a motivated teacher who had taken a personal interest in best practices for reading and writing came to our rescue. She used her structured literacy training and she identified that our son was having reading difficulties in grade 1 despite passing his screenings. That teacher encouraged us to ask the school for help assessing Kellan's needs, and when we asked, we were told by the school, wait until grade 3 and then the school will consider a psychoeducational assessment. But they warned us it could take years on the wait-list.

So instead, we sought a private psychoeducational assessment from out of town, and Kellan was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia.

Two years later, my daughter, Harper, came through kindergarten. And when we first asked her teacher, her teacher didn't know if her students had taken part in any literacy screenings or not.

In grade 2, my son finally started receiving some interventions at school, but he fell further behind his peers as the year went along. The boy who used to yell, chickens assemble, was now saying things like, I'll never learn to read, or, I just look at the pictures so my friends think I'm reading.

Another year came and went, and then, in grade 3, we asked for some more supports for Kellan. Research said that he needed three to four hours' intervention a week, not the one that he-hour a week that he was getting at school. And we were told by the school that instead of providing more resources, they were cutting one of the literacy support positions from the resource team and couldn't help us.

Now my son spends three hours a week at home receiving one-on-one tutoring to learn to read. In one year, after private out-of-town assessments and home

tutoring, my family has spent close to \$10,000 to help our son learn to read.

Universal early screening helps schools identify children at risk for reading difficulties, like Kellan, and this proactive approach enables timely interventions which can significantly improve literacy outcomes. And literacy is a gateway to so many things that we've heard about today: education, employment, well-being—the list goes on and on. And every child deserves the right to learn to read proficiently regardless of their background or their ability, not just the ones who are able to afford it.

When I look back at my family's story so far, I'm thankful that there were some screenings in place for some of my kids, but this needed to be consistent across all classrooms and all schools, and the right screening tools need to be used.

* (22:50)

Early literacy screening is only effective if the tools used are valid, reliable, they're sensitive to the risk factors for reading difficulties like dyslexia. Research shows that using outdated or poorly designed tools can lead to false negatives and missing kids who need help—like Kellan, false reassurance where we think everything's fine when it's not and wasted resources as interventions don't match a child's actual needs.

I'm excited that Bill 225 is being considered and I understand the philosophy that many may have when considering mandating things in schools. I understand the push to not want to be too prescriptive and to let schools find what works for them.

But without specifying a list or criteria for screening, there's a risk of inequality. Some schools may be better at identifying competent screening tools and other schools might miss the mark. Or schools may even choose tools based on convenience, cost or familiarity and not scientific rigour.

To create this list of screening tools, my hope is the ministry and yourselves can pull from evidence-based criteria, look at validity, reliability, predictive value of these tools. My hope is that this bill can mandate literacy screening for sure, but also provide a list of recommended tools that schools can pick from.

And maybe even going a bit further: allow for schools to select screening tools that aren't on that list, but provided they can demonstrate equivalent scientific merit for those tools. That could perhaps strike a balance between ensuring minimum standards of

quality and still allow in some local choice, just local choice within evidence-based boundaries.

Kellan's story isn't one of struggle; it's one of discovery. And once we found that missing piece of the puzzle and understood how he learned, everything changed. His confidence started to grow, his joy for reading along with it. And that's what universal screening can do. It shines a light on the students in our classrooms and makes sure that no child has to wait to be seen.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Depner.

Any questions?

MLA Lamoureux: I'd like to thank you for your presentation this evening and for highlighting the importance of a child's confidence; that can't be stated enough this evening as we continue on through committee here.

I also want to thank you for being very honest about the amount of money, \$10,000 that you had to spend, just to get where you are today. And I believe that education—I believe everyone around this table would agree with this, that education and learning and reading is a fundamental human right. It is something that Canada prides itself on, and you should not have had to pay \$10,000 to get to where you are.

And that is why this legislation is so important, to ensure that every single student is being screened and parents don't have to seek outside private resources, especially for those parents who cannot afford to do so.

So, thank you.

The Chairperson: Mr. Depner, would you like to respond?

A. Depner: Yes, no, I echo that sentiment. Obviously, we know it's a big month right now with the human rights commission releasing the Right to Read report at the end of October, and so I'm—further to this point, I'm excited to see what that has to say as well.

MLA Schmidt: Thank you very much, Mr. Depner, for your presentation here tonight.

Thank you for your acknowledgement of the need to strike a balance and not be too prescriptive. I think you've hit the right note and I think we very much agree with you on that note. While, you know, to be frank, as minister—myself today, I'm comfortable with myself having that discretion, but I have to tell you

that I don't know how comfortable I would be in giving that discretion to any and all governments, especially if you were paying attention to some of the debate that we had here in our Chamber yesterday.

Something that you said really struck a chord with me, which is local choice within evidence-based boundaries, and I would argue and suggest to you, Mr. Depner—and to all the presenters here tonight—that is exactly what our department has mandated, this is exactly the work we are doing and what has rolled out in schools this year for a pilot. And that is that our department and—we are providing criteria. We are working with school divisions in consultation to make sure that the tools that they picked are local—are made within a local choice, but with those evidence-based boundaries.

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: Mr. Depner, would you like to respond to that?

A. Depner: Thank you.

Mrs. Cook: Thank you, Mr. Depner, for your presentation. And despite the veiled partisan comments from the minister, I think the value of this legislation is, in fact, that it enshrines early universal screening in such a way that no government could change it. And I think you've reinforced the value of early screening and the importance of passing this legislation.

So thank you.

The Chairperson: Mr. Depner, would you like to respond?

A. Depner: Yes, again, thank you so much.

The Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation tonight, Mr. Depner.

Next we have Colette Pancoe.

Thank you for your patience this evening and waiting, and please go ahead with your presentation.

Colette Pancoe (Private Citizen): Thank you all for your patience and waiting. My name is Colette Pancoe. I'm here to provide my support for Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act.

Our daughter, Hazel, has always been a kid on the move with people to meet. She is curious and bright with a genuine interest in the world around her and the people she meets. She has empathy for others, a generosity of spirit as well as an almost preternatural ability to connect with other people.

I remember in grade 2, Hazel telling us that she was interested in learning to read. My husband and I are passionate readers, and sharing stories with Hazel has been one of the greatest joys of parenthood. We were thrilled to talk about books with Hazel, hear her ideas about them; but despite our family's collective enthusiasm, Hazel's considerable efforts to read did not seem to be producing any results.

I quickly learned that just knowing how to read myself did not qualify me as a teacher of reading. Our cozy family book club was becoming a source of frustration for all of us. At that point we approached her grade 2 teacher for tips and tricks, but she indicated that Hazel was fine and that things would just click eventually.

These are themes that I'm sure you've heard many times already tonight. We decided to sign her up with a reading coach, and within one or two lessons, the tutor asked to speak with Hazel's teacher. The coach felt like something was different but didn't want to infer too much, given the fact that Hazel was an immersion student and the coach was not sure what were reasonable expectations across teaching curricula.

Again, Hazel's classroom teacher confidently said that everything was fine, that Hazel's on target with her learning, and the matter was set aside.

In hindsight I wish we'd had more information about screening tools. What was informing her teacher's confidence? I now understand how Bill 225 would provide a provincial standardization for tools used so that parents like us could potentially have had better language for our concerns and maybe a framework to guide discussion with the school.

Towards the end of grade 3, we decided to pursue independent testing to reassure ourselves. While we had faith in her classroom teacher, who was a kind and capable woman whom Hazel just adored, we knew that the stakes were just too high. We told ourselves that we could just put Hazel's name on the eight-month wait-list for a psychological screening, and, if the reading just suddenly clicked in, as we were promised, we reasoned that we could just cancel the appointment.

The testing cost of \$3,000 was very high, and despite partial health insurance coverage, this amount was high enough to prompt several conversations about affordability before proceeding. When the appointment and the report were finally complete, it was Christmas of Hazel's grade 4 year. This was a time when most of her peers were well on their way

to literacy. The result of her assessment confirmed our suspicion of dyslexia.

While I have since learned that the current Manitoba education universal early reading screening plan mandates two screenings per year similar to the proposed Bill 225, without the addition of mandatory follow-up for students, students like Hazel can and do remain hidden in classrooms.

After Hazel's diagnosis, we found ourselves mid-year trying to find out about fee-for-service dyslexia instruction in the city, which has limited options and is very expensive. The school strongly discouraged us to pursue any kind of literacy instruction during the day, but Hazel was so tired by 3 o'clock, she could hardly concentrate.

While her school did make some efforts to provide additional instruction through a Barton coach, these coaches were often switched, scheduling was irregular and sessions were cancelled frequently. We were told by the school that virtually all EA resources were being rerouted to assist with a huge influx of young learners in the school.

While Hazel is slowly and steadily improving at reading, we have continued worries that we as parents have not done enough. Hazel works extremely hard at learning, harder than my partner and I have worked ever—worked at her age, and for lesser results. Her grade 5 teacher informed us at the end of last year that Hazel's falling progressively behind in all subjects. She noted again how there is a dearth of resources to support bringing Hazel to grey level, and consequently there is no concrete plan in place to alter her downward learning trend.

* (23:00)

With heavy hearts, our family made the difficult decision to send Hazel to a private school, where we were promised adequate interventions to support her.

As all parents do, we second-guessed our decisions. This particular one involved sending her away from her home community, away from her circle of friends in exchange for educational support for dyslexia.

It is important to overlook—sorry—it is impossible to overlook the role of privilege in our dyslexia story; that so many opportunities are available to Hazel as a result of being an only child in a household of two professional income earners should not be lost on anyone here.

From diagnosis to tutoring and now private school, our ability to pay out of pocket has thus far been an

essential component to Hazel's road to literacy. I'm acutely aware of how different this looks and does—would look and does look for thousands of other families.

My spouse and I do not have backgrounds in education. We don't purport to understand the subtleties of this bill, nor can we go back in time and restart Hazel's education with this Bill 225 in place, in order to compare outcomes.

We do understand our own experience, which shows us that the current system does not go far enough to identify and support students like Hazel. Students will become our province's next generation of workers, of citizens and of community builders. We respectfully request that you pass this bill.

As Hazel's mom and her advocate, I chose to be here today to ensure that a record exists, both of her presence within the public school system as a dyslexic learner and now the absence of it as well.

While change is too slow to come to amend our daughter's story, my hope is that in knowing she exists, you the committee can find inspiration and fortitude for implementing the changes required to allow all the Hazels currently hidden within Manitoba classrooms and all the Hazels still to come to have a chance to succeed where our daughter could not.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Pancoe.

MLA Lamoureux: Thank you for sticking around this evening and for sharing your presentation and for sharing so much about Hazel's experience through the school system. I'm very sorry that you had to move schools to have different access—better access, perhaps, in this case, to resources.

My hope is that this legislation will ensure that no parent has to do that in the future going forward here in Manitoba.

I'm just wondering if you shared this legislation with Hazel and just if she had any thoughts about it.

C. Pancoe: We did—like, she has a vague understanding that we're here today to try and advocate for other children with dyslexia. And so she's proud of that. I feel like being in her current school has maybe—I see more of a sense of empowerment for her because she's around other children with learning difficulties, and it's just normalized in a very different way. So I feel like that's—she feels proud, yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Mrs. Cook: Thank you so much for your presentation. You being here, and many of the other presenters tonight—Hazel's name and her story are now part of the official record and will be forever, so you've done a really good thing being here tonight.

And one of the things I picked up on in your presentation was just highlighting the ways that this legislation builds on the minister's directive and includes elements that maybe weren't in the directive and strengthen it. And I think, you know, you've reinforced why it's really important that we pass this legislation.

So thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. Pancoe?

C. Pancoe: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Mr. King: Ms. Pancoe, thank you for being here and sharing your story, your presentation, along with all the other presenters here tonight. You sat here and you waited all night—and the support group that you've got around you, because you had the—the first presenter here tonight is still here supporting one that's getting closer to the last. But it's an eye-opener for some of us—these—hearing these heartfelt stories.

You know, I had four boys of my own and never had to go through what some of you folks have gone through, with your emotional and financial hardships. The toughest thing I had to do with my boys was try and help them with their math, that I had no idea what I was doing. I felt like I was the one with the learning disability.

But far too often we take for granted how fortunate some of us are and my heart goes out to each and every one of you for what you've had to go through.

Thank you all so much for being here. I look forward to supporting a bill that we all can come together on and pass.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Ms. Pancoe?

C. Pancoe: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

MLA Schmidt: In the interest of time, thank you very, very much for your presentation, and our government's hope is that with our ministerial directive that we issued in April, making sure that these early—universal early reading screening tools are available in

schools this year, and immediately we'll make sure that stories like your child's, hopefully, are not repeated. That's what I think we can all agree why we're here tonight.

You mentioned that you're not a legislative or a legal expert, and I would argue you don't need to be. We don't—you know, this ministerial directive is, I believe, accomplishing what we all intend to accomplish here tonight.

So thank you very much.

C. Pancoe: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Any further questions?

Thank you for your presentation this evening.

Mr. Jarod Strelnikow. I'll just see if he's online. So Jarod's at the end of the list, and now we're going to go through the list one final time from all the folks who weren't here, so there'll be the names repeated.

So, David Grant? Patricia—David Grant will be struck from the list.

Patricia Macdonald? Patricia will be struck from the list.

Josee Adrian? Josee will be struck from the list.

Jeanne Hudek? Jeanne will be struck from the list.

Dr. Darja Barr? Dr. Barr will be struck from the list.

Mrs. Brianna Neufeld? Brianna Neufeld will be struck from the list.

Mrs. Alicia Smith? Alicia Smith will be struck from the list.

Ms. Angela Yaskiw? Ms. Yaskiw will be struck from the list.

Mr. Marko Bebek? Mr. Bebek will be struck from the list.

Ms. Sherri Penner? Ms. Penner will be struck from the list.

Mr. Alan Campbell? Mr. Campbell will be struck from the list.

Angelina Hartwell? Angelina Hartwell will be struck from the list.

Mr. Jarod Strelnikow? Jarod Strelnikow will be struck from the list.

And that concludes our list of presenters.

* * *

The Chairperson: We will now move to the clause by clause.

Does the bill sponsor, the honourable member for Tyndall Park, have an opening statement?

MLA Lamoureux: I do.

The Chairperson: Please go ahead.

MLA Lamoureux: I'm very excited to be here this evening to see Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act, universal learning—universal screening for learning disabilities, go through committee. And what better day to have committee than on International Dyslexia Awareness Day.

Happy International Dyslexia Awareness Day to everyone in attendance.

Bill 225 is very important and very tangible, as we have heard here tonight. The bill will improve Manitoba's literacy rates by further identifying students who may struggle with learning disabilities. It acts by amending The Public Schools Act to ensure all Manitoba students from kindergarten to grade 3 be screened twice a school year by an assessment tool approved by the minister.

It further ensures that parents and legal guardians will be informed of their child's screening results within 30 days and, lastly, it legislates that school boards must use the screening result to guide further assessments and allocate specialized resources accordingly. It is important to highlight, as it's been shared here tonight, that currently Manitoba's 37 school divisions do not have a clear or consistent direction with respect to screening assessments for reading.

* (23:10)

However, this legislation, Bill 225, allows Manitoba to join many other jurisdictions in Canada who mandate universal screening for all students through legislation.

And I did just want to add: I'm a bit nervous from what I am hearing from the government and I hope that I am wrong on this. But I would welcome any amendments that my colleagues have to bring forward. We can have those conversations. I know the minister spoke about—perhaps she does not or she does not believe that the minister should have a say on the assessment tool.

We can absolutely explore that and change the language in the bill. And my hope is that the government will bring forward amendments rather than strike down this legislation.

I recognize that, just a few days after I introduced this legislation back in the spring, that the government sent out a similar news release. And after consulting with concerned teachers and specialists about the release, it was made clear that Bill 225 is even more time-sensitive now because what the legislation does that the directive that the minister speaks about doesn't do.

The legislation ensures that educators provide the results of the screening to the parent or legal guardian of the student within 30 days after administering the screening. The directive does not do this. It—the legislation ensures that school board follow up with further—school boards follow up with further assessments and other specialized resources that are allocated based on the results of the screening.

And lastly, the legislation—again, unlike the directive—provides details and a commitment to our education system, the way it has been committed in other provinces across Canada, that ours is currently lacking. I've learned a lot of information tonight, one of which includes that the government's directive is not taking effect as of right now because we've heard that non-evidence-based screening is still happening, and that is exactly why we need it to be legislated.

So as I wrap up my thoughts, I want to reiterate my appreciation for all the individuals I was able to consult with on this legislation, through teachers, pediatricians, speech pathologists, audiologists. Thank you to all the parents and everyone just for coming out, for sharing your stories, your testimonies.

And my hope is that this bill will pass through committee tonight and will be called and pass third reading immediately.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: We thank the member.

Does any other member wish to make an opening statement on Bill 225?

MLA Schmidt: Thank you, firstly, to all of the many presenters for taking the time out of their busy schedules to participate here in this democratic process tonight, for sharing your opinions and your expertise with the committee.

I've—it's been a pleasure to have had already the opportunity to meet with some of you. We've heard tonight that some of you have already had the chance to meet, if not with me, with the department, and I very much look forward and welcome any meetings with any of you that I haven't had a chance to meet with yet. Like the MLA from Tyndall Park and others

have mentioned, I've learned much here tonight and in the last few months from each of you.

So thank you very much.

We've heard many different voices here tonight and many different experiences, but I think it's very true to say that, fundamentally, we all want the same things, and that's for better literacy outcomes and experiences for every child in Manitoba. And please rest assured that your NDP government believes that all students have the right to learn and to read, and we take this very seriously. In fact, it is the reason many of us ran for these roles.

Our government is, in fact, made up of multiple teachers—some of them are on this committee here tonight—educators on this committee here tonight, student leaders, school board trustees and, of course, parents, myself included.

I don't want to take up space and time here tonight, but I also am a mother of three, and one of my children also had experienced some reading difficulties, and I felt some of the frustrations; I have felt and experienced some of the frustrations and emotions that you all have felt here tonight. So I just want to reflect that back at you and let you know that I have felt those same things. I have had those experiences. And so I just wanted to—without taking up too much space—just reflect that experience that you've all had.

So we know that first-hand, that improving—with all the educators that we have on our NDP government team, we know first-hand that improving literacy outcomes takes a comprehensive and student-centred approach that is tailored to meet individual students' needs. That's why we've taken significant steps towards providing direction and supports to our partners in the sector and towards building the capacity and skills of educators to meet the needs of students with specific learning disorders, including dyslexia.

Again, however, our directive is intended to not only meet the needs of students experiencing disorders like dyslexia but also students that are experiencing other barriers short of a specific learning disorder or disability. That's why we have implemented our nutrition program; that's why we are implementing policies, like, to provide kids with more one-on-one time with their teachers and educators in the classroom by increasing funding to schools, by hiring more teachers.

We are—we have specific programs to retain our clinicians. We know that early identification of learning needs is essential to the support of early literacy in Manitoba classrooms. We agree strongly with the presenters here tonight on that point. Early reading screening is a key component of consistent and regular classroom reading assessment practices to support the early identification of students who are at risk of reading difficulties, including specific learning disorders like dyslexia.

That's why in April of 2025, we issued our directive to all publicly funded schools and school divisions to ensure that early reading screeners are implemented universally in divisions and schools across Manitoba. This year is a pilot year. Next year there will be full implementation.

This means that within a Manitoba school division, every student from kindergarten to grade 4 will be assessed within the same division-wide early reading screener for at least three of those four years. Screening will occur twice a year. Bill 220—pardon me—Bill 225 proposes a requirement to provide screening results to parents within a 30-day time frame.

While not identical, the intent of this requirement is already being met through the provincial directive to schools to ensure that parents and caregivers receive results of early reading screeners within the first and second reporting periods of the school year.

It was suggested here tonight that perhaps there's no accountability in our directive or any reporting in our directive. I would like to correct the record. That is not the case. As I just mentioned, school divisions will be required to report to parents during the reporting period. School divisions will also have to report into the department what tool they are using. As we've mentioned, we are making those—we are helping school divisions make those selections with our support, and school divisions were also going to have to report in on the completion of those assessments.

Bill 225 also proposes that screening tools must be approved by the minister and, as I've said already, I appreciate the member's intent for this proposal. Our government feels strongly that local voice matters and that there needs to be the freedom and flexibility for school divisions to select early reading screener tools based on their local needs and, of course, balanced with provincial oversight and direction.

We have provided a set of specific criteria to divisions to ensure that selected screeners are evidence-

based, reliable and able to predict students who may be at risk for future reading difficulties, including disabilities like dyslexia. We've heard the need from that from many presenters here tonight, so, thank you.

I can share that department staff are working closely with school divisions as they choose these screening tools this year. I will also note that a number of school divisions were already doing this work and are generously sharing their knowledge and experience with other divisions. So again, an example of us all working together to support early literacy in Manitoba.

I was very pleased, as minister, to receive in April the statement issued by Dyslexia Canada in support of Manitoba's directive to schools and school divisions about the universal implementation of early reading screeners. We appreciate your expertise, your advocacy and your support.

And I would like to note for the committee that our department has also received other statements, emails and expressions of support from school divisions, educators and parents across the province about their appreciation and their excitement about our directive and that it's being rolled out in schools already. So thank you for that.

So we are further supporting strengthened literacy education in Manitoba through renewed language arts curricula. A refined ELA curricula was released just this year for piloting. The curriculum includes concrete measurable learning outcomes across grade levels with an emphasis on phonemic awareness and foundational skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening in the early years. A curriculum that provides clear learning outcomes at every grade, along with implementation of early reading screening in the early years, will support educators in implementing appropriate evidence-based programming to meet the unique needs of their students.

Our curriculum also proactively responds to what we reasonably anticipate to hear from the Manitoba Human Rights Commission. We thank them for their work and their collaboration in the development of that curriculum, and we've also developed that curriculum with the benefit of what we've learned from the Ontario commission's report, which has been referenced here tonight.

We do share some of the substantive concerns that have been raised by the presenters here tonight and those have been articulated very well, so we won't

belabour those concerns for the member of Tyndall Park and the committee have heard them.

* (23:20)

Suffice it to say, while I strongly support the member's intent of Bill 225 and thank her for her work in community and her advocacy for children and families, I am very pleased to share that these legislative amendments are not required to achieve our shared objective of ensuring all children in Manitoba receive regular early reading screening and are properly supported on their literacy and learning journeys.

Respectfully, I would suggest to the committee and the member that Bill 225, while the spirit, intent is beautiful, we want to avoid—again, we're trying to strike that balance and avoid redundancy—the intent behind Bill 225, having already been actioned via a ministerial directive, via the ongoing work in the department, via the ongoing work of advocates and other strong partners and leaders in this room and in the sector.

So on that note, I will end my comments with deep gratitude for all of the many educators, clinicians, teachers that are doing the work of supporting our learners in the classroom today. And to the many caregivers and families that support our learners in so many ways, day in and day out, I just want to end by acknowledging, again, the real emotional work.

There's a lot of advocacy going on in this room tonight, but I think there's also a lot of really emotional labour that's going on, and so I just want to really acknowledge that. I have felt that in the meetings that I've had on an individual basis with some of you, and I—we hear it and see it here in the room tonight, and so I just want to acknowledge everyone's perspectives and their feelings and their emotions. We know how—what an important issue this is for parents, for caregivers, for educators and for Manitobans.

So thank you all very much.

The Chairperson: Thank the member.

Mrs. Cook: I would like to start, first of all, for thanking everyone who came here tonight to present. We've been here for almost five and a half hours, and despite what is turning out to be a very disappointing outcome, your presentations were not for nothing. I want to stress that.

Despite the fact that it seems that the government is not going to pass this bill, and—it's not too late to change their minds; we haven't voted on the clause by clause yet. I hope that I'm wrong. I hope that they will pass the bill.

Your presentations were powerful. They form part of the permanent record. I know that I've taken your words to heart and I think we've all learned a lot tonight.

Members of my caucus, our team, are prepared to pass this bill through committee tonight and pass it at third reading if the government wants to get on board. I think we need this legislation, and I want to thank the member for Tyndall Park (MLA Lamoureux) for putting it forward. The reason we need the legislation is that it gives the directive teeth because it becomes the law and it includes elements that the directive does not have.

And I think some of you have spoken really powerfully to the value of not just early screening, but of providing those results to parents and the—arguably, the most important part—following up with the resources that are needed for early intervention, structured literacy, the changes that are needed here.

So I just want to express my thanks to all of you. I want to express my thanks to the member for Tyndall Park. It is a heck of a lot of work to bring forward a bill like this and to get this many people to come out to committee and stay here this late. You've done a really good thing and I think you should all be very proud of that.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: We thank the member.

So we will now, if there are no more final words, we'll now move on to the clause by clause of the bill.

During the consideration of a bill, the enacting clause and the title are postponed until all other clauses have been considered in their proper order.

Clause 1—pass; clause 2—pass; clause 3—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill be reported.

The hour being 11:25, what is the will of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Rise.

The Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 11:25 p.m.

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

Re: Bill 225

As a reading clinician with over 20 years of experience in Manitoba, I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact that delayed or missed diagnoses of dyslexia can have on students. Dyslexia, a common learning disability, affects a significant number of children, yet many go undiagnosed, leading to substantial challenges in their academic and personal lives. The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities) is a crucial step towards ensuring that all students receive the support they need to succeed.

One of the most immediate impacts of a missed dyslexia diagnosis is on academic success. Dyslexia primarily affects reading, spelling, and writing skills, which are foundational to most educational activities. Students with undiagnosed dyslexia often struggle to keep up with their peers, leading to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. Without proper diagnosis and support, these students do not receive the accommodation they need, such as extra time for exams or access to assistive technology. This lack of support can result in a cycle of failure and frustration, where students feel increasingly inadequate and unable to achieve their potential. Over the years, I have seen countless students who, despite their intelligence and effort, fall behind simply because their dyslexia was not identified early enough.

The impact of undiagnosed dyslexia extends beyond academics; it significantly affects students' self-esteem and emotional well-being. Dyslexia can lead to feelings of chronic inadequacy and inferiority, as students struggle with tasks that their peers find easy. This persistent struggle can result in anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. Many students internalize their difficulties, believing they are not smart or capable enough, which can have long-lasting effects on their confidence and mental health. I have worked with numerous students who, after finally receiving a diagnosis, expressed relief at understanding their struggles were not due to a lack of effort or intelligence but rather a specific learning difference. Early diagnosis and intervention can prevent these negative emotional outcomes, helping students develop a healthier sense of self-esteem and resilience.

Friendships and social interactions are also impacted by undiagnosed dyslexia. Students with dyslexia may feel isolated and excluded from social activities that involve reading or writing. They might avoid situations where their difficulties could be exposed, such

as reading aloud in class or participating in group projects. This avoidance can lead to social withdrawal and a lack of meaningful friendships. Additionally, the frustration and anxiety associated with dyslexia can affect how students interact with their peers, sometimes leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. Over the years, I have seen students who, despite their social potential, struggle to form and maintain friendships due to the challenges posed by their undiagnosed dyslexia. Early intervention can help these students develop better coping strategies and social skills, fostering healthier and more inclusive social interactions.

The long-term consequences of undiagnosed dyslexia are far-reaching. Many students who do not receive a diagnosis during their school years continue to struggle into adulthood. They may face difficulties in higher education and the workplace, where reading and writing skills are essential. This can limit their career opportunities and overall life satisfaction. Furthermore, the persistent challenges associated with dyslexia can lead to chronic stress and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. It is crucial to address these issues early on to prevent long-term negative outcomes and help individuals with dyslexia lead fulfilling lives.

The importance of early diagnosis and intervention for dyslexia cannot be overstated. As a reading clinician, I have seen the transformative effects that proper support can have on students' academic success, self-esteem, and social relationships. The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities) represents a critical step towards ensuring that all students with dyslexia receive the timely and effective support they need to thrive. By prioritizing early screening and intervention, we can break the cycle of failure and frustration, helping students unlock their full potential and lead fulfilling lives. It is time to recognize dyslexia not just as a challenge but as an opportunity to support and celebrate the unique strengths of neurodiverse learners.

Respectfully submitted,

Jodianna Paterson

Re: Bill 225

Honourable Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of Bill 225—a bill that carries the potential to transform the lives of children and families across our

province through the implementation of universal, publicly funded screening for learning and developmental disorders.

I am here today not only as a citizen, but as a parent whose family has experienced firsthand the pain and pressure of navigating a system that often waits too long to act—a system that still expects children to fail before they are seen.

Our family's journey has been filled with love and resilience—but also confusion, exhaustion, and heartbreak. We saw signs early. We asked questions. We advocated. But without universal screening, we were left to navigate a complicated and under-resourced system on our own. We waited for assessments. We waited for answers. And most painfully, we waited for help.

That wait came at a cost.

A cost to our child's mental health and confidence.

A cost to our family's emotional and financial stability.

And a cost to a system that could have stepped in earlier—and made a difference.

Bill 225 is more than legislation. It is a chance to prevent unnecessary suffering. It is a chance to offer every child—regardless of their background, diagnosis, or zip code—the dignity of early identification and the power of timely intervention.

Universal screening isn't about labels—it's about access. It's about catching signs early, when support can have the greatest impact. It's about removing the fear, the shame, and the silence so many parents carry when they feel something is wrong, but don't know where to turn.

Had universal screening been available to us, our story might have been very different. We might have had fewer battles to fight and more energy to support our child's growth. We might have avoided some of the trauma that comes from being unseen, unheard, and unsupported in a system meant to help.

We cannot change the past—but we can change the future for other families. Bill 225 gives us that chance.

I urge you to pass this bill and commit the necessary resources to make universal screening a reality in Manitoba. Let's stop asking families to break before they receive help. Let's lead with compassion, foresight, and care.

Our children are watching—let's show them they matter.

Thank you.

Cyndi Miles

Re: Bill 225

I am writing today in support of Bill 225, which supports every student's "Right to Read" and would introduce universal screening for learning disabilities for kindergarten through Grade 4 (rather than Grade 3, as per a policy directive I support.) I am strongly in support of this bill and hope you will vote to support every student's right to read. Manitoba currently has a hodgepodge of approaches to this issue, and it is leaving many students behind.

I write to you as a former teacher with a master's degree in Education and as the mom of twins with disabilities. One of my twins has dyslexia, which was only diagnosed in grade 3 when I became his teacher at the start of the pandemic. His Winnipeg School Division elementary school failed him in a variety of ways. We were dependent on private tutoring for dyslexia and a lot of my time and education training to help him catch up. Further, my other twin has ADHD, also diagnosed outside the school system, which also required substantial investment in therapies and supports that the school system and health system did not provide. We can do a lot better to support students and their families in Manitoba. Legislating universal screening and right to read legislation will make a huge difference. It does not fix everything—disabilities are hard—but would be a great step in the right direction.

Please support Bill 225. You're reading this letter because you were taught to read.

Every child deserves to be screened for difficulties and for this huge opportunity - the Right to Read.

Thank you,

Joanne Seiff

Re: Bill 225

I'm writing in support of Bill 225. As an educational assistant of fourteen years, I have witnessed firsthand the deleterious effects of a lack of supports for basic

literacy and numeracy. Universal screening would help to make sure no young child goes without the support they need to learn to read and do math. I've worked in nursery/kindergarten and supported children in extra help in reading and presently work in high school where I have seen students who weren't given supports and can't read. Most of these students have given up on the educational system and rarely attend school. Reading clinicians are not employed in high schools, so they don't get additional help once they reach high school. I believe they will find it difficult to find employment and participate meaningfully in society. Let's stop kids from falling through the cracks and implement universal screening from Grades one to three immediately.

Carol Nixon-Pauls

Re: Bill 225

Subject: Support for Bill 225 The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

Dear Kelvin Goertzen,

My name is John Mearon, and I am writing to express my strong support for Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities).

As a parent, I have seen firsthand how crucial early identification and intervention are for children with learning disabilities. When learning challenges are caught early, children receive the supports they need to thrive both academically and emotionally. When these challenges go undetected, students often experience unnecessary struggles, impacting their education, confidence, and future opportunities.

Universal screening ensures that no child is overlooked due to gaps in resources, awareness, or advocacy. It promotes equity in education and helps create a system where every child regardless of background can reach their full potential.

I strongly urge the committee to support and advance Bill 225. Our children deserve the best possible start in their education journeys.

I understand the government has developed a policy directive regarding universal screening. There are critical differences between the policy directive and Bill 225 that I would like to share:

Bill 225 explicitly states that parents/caregivers must be informed of the screening results within 30 days after the screening was administered;

Bill 225 explicitly states the school board must ensure that further assessments and other specialized resources are allocated based on the results of the screening; and

Bill 225 explicitly states each student shall be screened twice per year; however, the policy directive states the second screening will be optional, despite education experts disagreeing with this strategy.

Bill 225 states each student from kindergarten to Grade 3 shall be included in the universal screening; however, the new policy directive states students from kindergarten to Grade 4 shall be included. I am in support of having the bill amended to reflect the policy directive.

Additionally, I would appreciate being informed when Bill 225 is scheduled for its committee hearing so that I can plan to attend or submit further comments.

Thank you for your time and commitment to supporting all learners.

Sincerely,

John Mearon

Re: Bill 225

Subject: Support for Bill 225 The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities)

Dear Kelvin Goertzen,

My name is Virginia Acuna Hernandez. Government has developed a policy directive regarding universal screening. There are critical differences between the policy directive and Bill 225 that I would like to share:

Bill 225 explicitly states that parents/caregivers must be informed of the screening results within 30 days after the screening was administered;

Bill 225 explicitly states the school board must ensure that further assessments and other specialized resources are allocated based on the results of the screening; and

Bill 225 explicitly states each student shall be screened twice per year; however, the policy directive states the second screening will be optional, despite education experts disagreeing with this strategy.

Bill 225 states each student from kindergarten to Grade 3 shall be included in the universal screening;

however, the new policy directive states students from kindergarten to Grade 4 shall be included. I am in support of having the bill amended to reflect the policy directive.

Additionally, I would appreciate being informed when Bill 225 is scheduled for its committee hearing so that I can plan to attend or submit further comments.

Thank you for your time and commitment to supporting all learners.

Sincerely,

Virginia Acuna Hernandez

Re: Bill 225

Subject: Bill 225: The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities).

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to express my support of Bill 225: The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities). My daughter Hazel has dyslexia that went un-diagnosed for 3 years during her early education (Kindergarten to Grade 3), coinciding with the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has affected her development in reading. Her teachers assured us she was doing okay and they were not concerned with her progress, but after we paid for an expensive private assessment with Red Ladder Optimized Learning, it confirmed our suspicions. We are now paying for private tutoring two days per week, but it will take many years for Hazel to catch up.

Early diagnosis is critical to ensuring persons with learning difficulties get the treatment and support they require, so this bill will ensure families have the knowledge, tools and resources needed to help their child deal with their condition. Like any disability, children should not have barriers created for them by the education system. Screening all children will prevent many from falling through the cracks and missing critical years when the foundations of reading and writing are laid. Further, learning to read using dyslexia-appropriate methods is also helpful for children who do not have learning disabilities, so all students benefit from this approach. A rising tide lifts all boats.

I encourage you to pass this bill as quickly as possible so that as many children and families can start their successful journey to literacy immediately. I am happy to discuss this matter further if you desire.

Kind Regards,
Ryan Wakshinski

Re: Bill 225

To whom it may concern:

It is common knowledge that our school systems are woefully behind implementing the accepted research for many learning disabilities. It is also common knowledge that more and more children are being diagnosed with many varying degrees of dyslexia. It is very troubling that the talking points for elections is "inclusivity" "education" and the politically correct language when seeking approval for your high paying jobs. These talking points are conveniently forgotten when the needed changes to these archaic policies is routinely denied these children their human right. (If born in Canada). This willful denial of programs for all learning diverse (disabled) children is an embarrassment, when we consider ourselves an evolved society. Is this all a show? And who is the show for?

It's a travesty if Bill 225 is not passed and passed unanimously.

Ilana Schulz

Re: Bill 225

Dear committee members,

My name is Ginny Lees and I am writing to express my support for Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities).

I respectfully ask that you support and advance Bill 225 so that, through universal screening, children with dyslexia are identified early and then provided with the necessary resources to optimize their academic success.

I have 8 grandchildren, all attending grade school in Winnipeg and this issue is very important to me.

I was an elementary school student in Winnipeg in the late 1950's and early 60's, when dyslexia was not recognized as a specific learning disability. I recall the painful struggles of several of my classmates who did not have the benefit of either the relevant assessments or the appropriate learning supports. Beyond the academic struggles they experienced was a world of

social and emotional pain with consequent failure to realize their full potential as adults.

When acted upon, universal screening ensures that no child is overlooked due to gaps in resources, awareness, or advocacy. It promotes equity in education and helps create a system where every child can learn and thrive.

To that end, I am asking that you support Bill 225. I understand that the policy directive developed by the current government differs from Bill 225 in the following ways:

Bill 225 explicitly states that parents/caregivers must be informed of the screening results within 30 days after the screening was administered;

Bill 225 explicitly states the school board must ensure that further assessments and other specialized resources are allocated based on the results of the screening; and

Bill 225 explicitly states each student shall be screened twice per year. However, the policy directive states the second screening will be optional, despite education experts disagreeing with this strategy.

Thank you in advance for your commitment to support all learners for their individual benefit and for the good of our society as a whole.

Please do all that you can to ensure that Bill 225 is passed so that no Manitoba child is left behind.

Sincerely,

Ginny Lees

Re: Bill 225

My name is Holly Cebrij. I am a parent of two wonderful girls, one being diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. I'm here in support of Bill 225, universal screening of learning disabilities. I would like to share my experience as someone with dyslexia and as a parent so you can understand the importance of this policy for kids and families. This is my story.

When I was young, I was a quiet person. My dad raised my sister and I. I was in the resource room regularly throughout grade 2 and three, learning how to read and write. As a result, other students saw it and I was seen as stupid and was bullied on a regular basis—verbally and physically.

I couldn't answer questions if the teacher asked me because I didn't understand the question.

The teacher would get frustrated with me because I didn't understand how to handwrite, hold my pencil properly, write smaller and in between the lines.

If the class had to read out loud, I remember counting the paragraphs that I was supposed to read and I would read it in my head. Any words I didn't know, I would try to sound it out beforehand, so I didn't sound stupid when reading out loud in front of the class. Consequently, I missed the story, therefore I couldn't complete assignments.

I remember attending grade 4 parent teacher with my dad and the teacher said I was slow and a lazy learner and that I would catch on one day.

I would use my fingers to count in math class, and I was told I could not. I would use dots on my paper in place of using my fingers. I would study the multiplication table every day after school only to forget come Monday. I didn't understand verbal math instruction in class. I needed to physically see and touch cues to see how the equation worked.

Throughout jr & high school it didn't matter how hard I tried in class, I was never good at academics. I just didn't understand the verbal instructions and my working memory couldn't retain much. But I sat quietly and daydreamed daily my escape.

I managed to graduate but because of struggles with academics, I knew it would be a waste of money to attend post-secondary school.

In adulthood, domestic relationships were not great. I was always attracted towards men that were abusive - physically and verbally. I believe some of my partners were undiagnosed dyslexics, which would be the reason we were attracted to each other it was common ground. As undiagnosed dyslexics, frustration and emotional distress associated with dyslexia can manifest as aggressive behaviour. When individuals feel unable to express themselves adequately or experience repeated academic failures, they may resort to physical and verbal aggression to release pent up emotions. This behaviour can be a defense mechanism, a way to deflect attention from their learning difficulties or to assert control in situations where they feel powerless. It is important to recognize that this propensity for violence is often a symptom of underlying emotional and psychological struggles rather than an inherited trait.

I noticed my daughter had the same struggles in school as early as kindergarten. I had addressed these issues with the school only to be told the same lazy learner, will catch on eventually. Every year I fought for the school to assess, and they refused as she wasn't physically violent. As the parent, I noticed short term memory problems, such as difficulty remembering ABCs and numbers. She also confused letters, held her pencil differently, and wrote letters/numbers backwards.

In Grade 3, Alyssa's teacher was frustrated with Alyssa because she couldn't remember the multiplication table. This teacher expressed words to Alyssa, which has shut her down completely from academics and school. The school still refused to assess my daughter.

In Feb 2023, Alyssa was in grade 4 and I paid for a private assessment, which resulted in Alyssa being diagnosed with Dyslexia & ADHD combination. She was given accommodations in school to assist her. However, these accommodations weren't followed in grade 5.

I paid (using visa as I live paycheque to paycheque) for an assessment for myself in May 2024. I was also diagnosed with the same dyslexia & ADHD. Leading up to my diagnosis, I was battling alcohol addiction.

As a parent, it's natural to want to shield your daughter from challenges you faced, especially knowing firsthand the hurdles of dyslexia can present. My experiences have given me unique insights, and I want to leverage that knowledge to pave a smoother path for her. It's about ensuring she has tools, support, and understanding that weren't as readily available to me when I was growing up.

The goal isn't to eliminate all struggles, as challenges can foster resilience and growth. Instead, it's about equipping her with strategies and resources to navigate those challenges effectively. This involved seeking early intervention, advocating for appropriate accommodations in school, and simply fostering a home environment that celebrates her strength and supports her learning differences.

Ultimately, my desire to protect my daughter from the struggles I faced stems from a place of love and deep understanding of what she might encounter. By proactively addressing her needs and empowering her with the right tools, I hope to help her develop the confidence and resilience to thrive, despite the challenges dyslexia may present.

Had the school identified mine or Alyssa's struggles, perhaps our school experience could have been different. That's why Bill 225 is so important.

The impact of universal screening and mandatory early support extends beyond mere reading difficulties. The intersection of dyslexia with low self-esteem and propensity for violence creates a complex web of struggles. Constant struggles with reading and writing lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration. These feelings are often exacerbated by comparisons to peers who find academic tasks easier. Over time this can erode a person's confidence, leading to negative self-image, and a belief in their limited potential. Low self-esteem can affect various aspects of life beyond academic performance to social interactions, creating a cycle of discouragement and failure.

Bill 225 won't just address reading; it is a chance to save a child from a lifetime of mental health challenges and associated outcomes. It gives kids a chance at a future.

Holly Cebrij

Re: Bill 225

Supporting Bill 225: Why Universal Reading Screening Matters

I am writing in support of Bill 225, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Universal Screening for Learning Disabilities).

I have been an educator for forty years in a variety of roles, with literacy learning as the central focus most recently as a Certified Reading Clinician. This role, in particular, has given me the opportunity to work across multiple school divisions and service delivery models: assessing students, planning and delivering interventions, and supporting teachers as they strive to meet every child's needs.

There is never enough time or resources to meet all needs but in the past 10 to 15 years, the number of struggling readers has grown dramatically. When I first began exploring reading screeners, it wasn't because I wanted more assessments. It was because I was overwhelmed. Too many students were struggling, and the balanced literacy benchmark assessments I was using weren't giving me the information I needed to help them. The more I learned, the more I understood why. Standardized tests confirmed what I already knew but they were useful only for a small

number of students I could directly assess them and they were not accessible to teachers.

That experience led me to look deeper into universal reading screening, and it completely changed how I think about literacy support. However, I also worry that without proper guidance and support for teachers, implementation could fall short of its potential.

What Is Universal Screening and Why Does It Matter?

At its core, universal screening helps us identify students who may need reading support early, ideally before small gaps turn into large ones. It's not about labeling children; it's about catching potential difficulties when we can still make a meaningful difference. When done well, universal screening:

Enables earlier and more effective intervention.

Reduces the need for long-term, intensive support.

Ensures the most intensive supports are directed to those who need them most.

Highlights where system-wide resources are needed.

That last point is critical; without adequate resources, even the best intentions can't succeed. Screening also helps schools work more collaboratively and systematically by guiding teams to collect meaningful data, plan instruction, and monitor progress across all tiers of support.

Timing Is Everything

We know that good readers tend to improve steadily, while struggling readers often fall further behind, even if they're making gains. The gap grows wider over time, and the longer it persists, the harder it becomes to close. That's why timing is everything. Early intervention can change learning trajectories for all students, including those with dyslexia. Research shows that a struggling reader in Grade 1 has about a 90% chance of still struggling in Grade 4 if they don't receive effective instruction. Yet, if we intervene early—especially in Kindergarten through Grade 2—outcomes improve dramatically.

Although Kindergarten is not mandatory in Manitoba, it is the most important place to start if we want a literacy system that truly works. I would also encourage extending universal screening through at least the elementary grades to ensure long-term sustainability and continued growth.

What Makes a Good Screener?

Currently, divisions are responsible for selecting their own screeners, with limited provincial guidance. I believe the province should offer clearer direction, including recommended screeners that meet strong research and technical standards.

A good universal screener should be:

1. An Indicator of Early Reading Skills: Screeners act like a temperature check for key skills. They don't tell you everything, but they quickly show whether foundational skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension are on track. These indicators are teachable, meaning that instruction targeting them improves outcomes.

2. Fast: Screeners should take only 3-8 minutes per student, with quick scoring and manageable logistics. While coordination takes some planning, it is far more efficient than many previous assessments.

3. Reliable and Valid: A strong screener must be both consistent and accurate, backed by a solid research base and up-to-date technical manuals.

4. Predictive: This is perhaps the most valuable feature. Predictive benchmarks help identify students at risk for future reading difficulties and guide timely intervention. Diagnostic assessment can then pinpoint specific skill gaps—for example, whether a struggling Grade 6 reader needs support in advanced phonics, fluency, or foundational decoding.

Beyond Screening: Diagnostics and Progress Monitoring

When students fall below benchmark, diagnostic assessments help us determine exactly what skills are missing. Once instruction is planned, progress monitoring tracks growth over time, ensuring interventions are effective and adjusted as needed.

Screening three times per year through the elementary grades helps maintain gains and identify any new difficulties as they arise. I recommend that this become a minimum requirement, not only for students at risk but for all learners, as even those meeting benchmarks may experience difficulties later on.

Key Insights from Experience

Screeners are early-warning tools, not high-stakes tests. Their purpose is prevention, not labeling.

Effective screeners share specific qualities—they are quick, predictive, technically sound, and focused on essential early literacy skills.

The biggest investment must be in training and teacher support. Teachers need time, collaboration, and coaching to interpret data and act on it effectively.

Equity matters. Screeners aren't perfect but they still help uncover hidden difficulties for many learners who may be often over-looked.

Communication with families is key. Teachers must be supported with clear guidelines and system-level resources to share results and plan collaboratively.

Screening identifies risk, not diagnoses. It's a first step in a continuum of support, not an endpoint.

Why Bill 225 Matters

Reading is a human right. Early identification through universal screening is one of the most effective ways to make that right a reality for every child in Manitoba.

Supporting Bill 225 doesn't add unnecessary bureaucracy—it provides schools with the tools to prevent reading failure before it starts. However, for universal screening to reach its full potential, it must be supported by:

A clear, concise curriculum aligned with the skills we assess.

Professional learning that equips teachers to use data effectively.

Adequate resources to ensure screening and intervention are sustainable.

I would also like to see the Bill include a requirement for screening at least three times a year, from Kindergarten through Grade 6, to ensure ongoing monitoring and timely support. When we screen early, we change lives.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosana Montebruno

Re: Bill 225

Dear Committee Members,

I am a mother of 2 boys, ages 11 and 13 living in East St. Paul Manitoba. In 2020, we noticed that our son, at the time in grade 3, was struggling with his reading and writing. His teachers did not notice anything that warranted an intervention but as parents we knew that something was wrong. In December 2021, we sought

a private psychological assessment through Red Ladder. This assessment cost us over \$2000 and confirmed that our son had Dyslexia.

Since then, we have had to support our son through private tutoring that uses proven reading and writing decoding strategies like Orton-Gillingham. It has been a mental and financial drain on our family.

We strongly believe that our son's life could have dramatically been improved if he was screened at an appropriate age and effective intervention strategies

were implemented immediately. He is now in grade 8 and continues to play catch-up to achieve grade level reading and writing. We consider ourselves fortunate that we have the financial means to help our son but I know that there are many Manitoba families that could not offer their children these opportunities. The Manitoba Public School Boards need to provide early assessment for all pupils to ensure that every child in Manitoba is receiving early screening for disabilities.

Suzy Martins

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/hansard.html>