Chairperson Dromm, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on a topic that I care deeply about.

My name is Christina Reuterskiöld, and I am an Associate Professor and Chair of the NYU Steinhardt Department of Communicative Sciences and Disorders, where we educate future Speech-Language Pathologists. My research focuses on developmental language disorders in children, with a special interest in the reciprocal development of oral and written language.

Literacy skills are part of an individual’s language skills. There is a reciprocal relationship between the development of reading and writing and the development of oral language skills throughout the school-years.

Children we think of as dyslexic are challenged by the decoding phase of reading in an orthographic system, like English. Children with dyslexia struggle with decoding and encoding of the alphabetic system - with difficulties sounding out words, decoding words, and spelling words. These children will come from two groups:

A. Children who have had an earlier oral language learning disability, or language disorder, without any apparent reason - such as autism, intellectual handicaps, or social deprivation. This group represents approximately 7% of all kindergarteners, and many of these children continue to struggle with literacy learning.

B. The second group are children, who have not been identified with an oral language disorder, but who struggle when their language system is taxed with the challenge to learn to read and write, which requires them to actively think about language as a system, and represent spoken words and sounds in writing.

A third group of children do not show significant problems with decoding, and they would therefore not be included under the diagnosis of dyslexia. These children have oral reading skills that sound fine, but they have poor reading comprehension and are talked about as "poor comprehenders." They typically also have weaker general language skills, including a lower level of oral language comprehension. When the oral and written language they have to process in the classroom gets increasingly complex, they struggle.

Poor comprehenders can go undetected, and fall behind in all academic areas, if we do not have structured identification and screening systems in place. Language skills (oral and written) are used in every single subject in school, not just in ELA.
So what can we do to help children with these different problems? Early identification and screening is central. Letter-identification, and tasks that test if children have the awareness that words are made of sounds and can be represented by letters, are good screening tasks. We also have to make sure that comprehension is tested, not just reading fluency. Finally, it is important to raise awareness of different types of oral language and literacy difficulties, to make sure that all children who need help get help.

I am pleased to see that proposed legislation would provide continuing education for teachers and school administrators in the area of dyslexia and language-learning disabilities. Early identification and support is important, but it is also important to continuously screen students, since language processing vulnerabilities change over time and may look different at different points in development.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and for taking the time to have a hearing on a topic that affects so many children in New York City and New York State. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.