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Testimony in Support of SB 1067 - Early Math Screening

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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

My name is Charles Wilkes. I am an assistant professor of mathematics education research, and my role here today is to share some of the research that helps explain why this bill matters.

Too often in our society we hear people say, “I’m not a math person.” Interestingly, we rarely hear someone say, “I’m not a reading person.” That difference tells us something important about how students come to see themselves as learners. But the truth is that children are not born believing they are or are not math people. Students come into this world curious about patterns, quantities, and relationships. They are natural sensemakers. This bill aims to build on and leverage those existing strengths.

The research on early mathematics learning is clear. While it may not always receive the same attention in the press, the evidence around early math screening and early intervention is strong. We know that achievement in mathematics is currently low across grade levels and often declines as students move through school. That makes the early years incredibly important, because they are when the foundations for later learning are built.

When we talk about early childhood mathematics, we are referring to foundational ideas such as understanding numbers and quantities, one-to-one correspondence, comparing amounts, and spatial reasoning. These early skills may seem simple, but they are deeply connected to later mathematics learning, including algebra, data science, and calculus. Research shows that when students develop strong mathematical understanding in the early years, it predicts later academic success, in some cases even more strongly than early literacy.

This is where the role of screening becomes important. A math screener is simply a short, developmentally appropriate check-in that helps teachers understand how students are developing these foundational skills. It is not punitive, and it is not designed to diagnose cognitive conditions like dyscalculia. Its purpose is much simpler. It gives educators timely information so they can provide support early, before small gaps become larger obstacles.

This bill takes an important step towards equitable screening practices. We know that historically, assessments and diagnostics have sometimes been used in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes or track Black and Brown students into lower opportunities. This bill pushes us to do something different. It calls for screening practices that recognize students’ linguistic, cultural, and racial resources and that treat students’ knowledge and experiences as strengths rather than deficits.

This perspective is especially important when we consider the long-standing disparities in mathematics outcomes for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). These disparities are not reflections of ability. In

my own research and in the broader research literature, we consistently see that young children enter school eager, capable, and curious about mathematics. The challenge is whether our systems recognize that potential early enough and provide the support needed to nurture it.

I also want to highlight that this bill builds on important work the state is already doing. California has made significant investments in mathematics education, including the adoption of the 2023 California Mathematics Framework. The framework emphasizes equitable access to deep mathematical learning. Early screening and intervention complement these investments by ensuring that students develop the foundational understandings they need to fully participate in high-quality mathematics instruction.

It is also important to say clearly that kindergarten is not too early to provide support. Children enter school with a wide range of mathematical experiences shaped by their homes, communities, access to early learning opportunities, and broader systems such as resources and policies. The earlier we can identify where support is needed, the more effectively schools can respond.

SB 1067 should be seen as part of a broader solution. Screening alone will not solve every challenge in mathematics education. But it is an important step toward building systems that notice students earlier, respond earlier, and support students before gaps widen.

In closing, early childhood mathematics has always mattered, but it has not always received the attention it deserves. This bill represents a meaningful step toward supporting both the foundational mathematical knowledge students need and the positive mathematical identities that shape how they see themselves as learners.

When we invest early, we invest in students' confidence, curiosity, and opportunity.

Thank you.