

TO: Vermont Senate Education Committee

FROM: Cynthia Gardner-Morse, M.Ed.

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RE: Support for S.204, An Act Relating to Reading Assessment and Intervention

DATE: Friday, January 5, 2024

I want to be clear that I am here as a private citizen, a very concerned citizen I am not representing the Advisory Council on Literacy.

Let me introduce myself and my family. My name is Cynthia Gardner-Morse. I grew up in an 1850's farmhouse built by my ancestors. I attended one room schools in Calais I trained as an elementary teacher at the University of Vermont. I taught primary school in Bakersfield and Cabot, Vermont. I earned my Master's degree from Harvard, studying under Jeanne Chall) Then I taught near Paris, France, and in Massachusetts. For more nearly 50 years I have been improving my skills as a teacher.

I have intimate experience with the specific needs and challenges dyslexia brings, being the mother of three children with dyslexic. One of our children only required a little tutoring. Another required several years of tutoring and in high school received accommodations through Section 504. One required extensive year-round tutoring. High school began a year of building frustration that led to angry outbursts. Our district, either unwilling or unable to provide her the necessary accommodations, placed her in a private out-of-state school where she was appropriately taught with structured literacy. She was challenged and she flourished, but Vermont sent her **out of state** to get what she needed. I am proud that all three of our children graduated from the University of Vermont and are gainfully employed here in the State of Vermont. With the right support, children with disabilities can be successful contributing members of our communities.

For 17 years, I have worked as a private literacy tutor, helping children who struggle with academic skills. While I can help these children, what about the children whose families cannot afford private services? We have a growing epidemic of reading failure even though we have the scientific evidence to treat this epidemic effectively.

Children have a right to read. Right now more than half of Vermont's children are failing to learn to read. In Fourth Grade, 9 out of 10 children with diagnosed disabilities are failing to

read. [Based on the 2022 NAEP 4th grade reading scores, 94% of Vermont students identified with disabilities are below “at Proficient.”]

Vermont has existing state statutes about literacy. They are listed on p. 5 of the Legislative Report from the Advisory Council on Literacy.

As stated in 16 V.S.A. § 2903, reading skills have a lifelong impact (See also pp. 7-8 in S.204):

§ 2903. Preventing early school failure; reading instruction

(a) Statement of policy. **The ability to read is critical to success in learning. Children who fail to read by the end of the first grade will likely fall further behind in school. The personal and economic costs of reading failure are enormous both while the student remains in school and long afterward.** All students need to receive systematic reading instruction in the early grades from a teacher who is skilled in teaching reading...Some students may require intensive supplemental instruction tailored to the unique difficulties encountered.¹

As a tutor I use Structured Literacy, a method that is systematic, explicit, direct, sequential, and cumulative. You may hear that Structured Literacy is only phonics instruction. That is not true. Structured Literacy includes addressing the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Being competent in all these skill areas creates a skilled reader, one for whom looking at words automatically (without conscious thought) creates meaning.

Vermont is late to identify struggling children part of the reason for this is the failure of school districts to implement Response to Intervention (RtI) (usually as part of a Multi-Tiered System of Support [MTSS]). This despite a [tiered system of support requirement in Vermont law](#)² RtI is a system of universal screening, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluations to insure early identification and effective instruction.

Some worry that assessments will overidentify or label children. Monitoring a student’s Response to Intervention will quickly catch children who does not need services, or someone who has learned what was holding them back. Children label themselves, however, using words like, “stupid,” “slow,” “dumb.” But when children learn the code of the English language, they are empowered. They do not need to guess from pictures or initial letters. They become readers! Their vocabularies and general knowledge grow as they read more and more text.

What happens in real-life situations for people who are unable to read, or to read well?

¹ <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/16/099/02903>

² [16 V.S.A. § 2902](#). Tiered system of supports and educational support team.

“Lousy reading produces a perception of stupidity and dumbness to peers and clearly to the youngster who is struggling. That is the shame,” states neuropsychologist Dr. Reid Lyon, who served as Chief of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and oversaw the 2000 National Reading Panel.³ Decades of research have confirmed his conclusion.

Poor reading often results in low self-esteem, anger, school failure, anxiety, depression,⁴ and suicide.⁵ Students who cannot read well struggle with social and behavioral issues.⁶ They are six (6) times more likely to drop out of high school.⁷ 75% of youth in the U.S. juvenile court system are functionally illiterate.⁸

[The National Center on Improving Literacy](#) (NCIL, a partnership among literacy experts, university researchers, and technical assistance providers, with funding from the United States Department of Education) states, “There is broad agreement that schools should implement early screening and intervention programs. [State legislation generally favors the use of universal screening within schools across grades K-2, where students are screened annually to assess risk for dyslexia and other reading disabilities.](#)”⁹ See also their [considerations in universal screening.](#)¹⁰ [Vermont is one of only 10 states that does not have regulations requiring screening for dyslexia and other reading disabilities in K-2.](#)¹¹

David Kilpatrick, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology for the State University of New York, College at Cortland and is also a New York State Certified School Psychologist, points out that [Response to Intervention \(RtI, the academic portion of a Multi-Tiered System of Support \[MTSS\]\) produced such strong results by using intensive phonemic awareness and intensive letter-sound instruction.](#)¹²

G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D., Distinguished Scientist Emeritus at The University of Texas at Dallas and also Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Southern Methodist University, notes that these methods apply to children in poverty and minorities and that “[We can reduce illiteracy in many](#)

³ US Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). [National Reading Panel.](#)

⁴ International Dyslexia Association. (2022). [Social and emotional problems related to dyslexia.](#)

⁵ Daniel SS, Walsh AK, Goldston DB, Arnold EM, Reboussin BA, Wood FB. [Suicidality, school dropout, and reading problems among adolescents.](#) J Learn Disabil. 2006 Nov-Dec; 39(6):507-14.

⁶ The Children’s Reading Foundation. (2021). [What’s the impact?](#)

⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). [Early warning confirmed.](#)

⁸ Invisible Children. (2018). [75% of inmates are illiterate \(19% are completely illiterate\) Ruben Rosario.](#)

⁹ National Center on Improving Literacy, [Best Practices in Universal Screening.](#) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2019.

¹⁰ National Center on Improving Literacy, [Considerations in universal screening.](#) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2019.

¹¹ National Center on Improving Literacy, [State of Dyslexia,](#) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2020. See “Screening Policies” tab.

¹² School Psyched Podcast, [SPP 73: Assessing and Supporting Reading Difficulties with Dr. Kilpatrick,](#) Oct. 21, 2018.

[of our research sites – in real classrooms in real schools with real kids at risk where ninety-eight percent are free and reduced lunch, and eighty percent are a minority. That is seventy percent of kids leaving the first grade as failing readers reducing to two to six percent when we do it right.](#)¹³

RtI is one of the biggest research findings since the NRP report. These studies had such strong findings that the U.S. Office of Education rushed it into the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

So why are Vermont's school districts not implementing RtI and screenings? Internal politics at the Agency of Education and with other state-wide organizations seem to be responsible. I am reaching out publicly here, to ask our leaders to work together. I have asked privately, and not received a reply. Our current methods are not working. We all share the goal of universal literacy; let's work together to use scientifically based research to make universal literacy happen in our small state.

Our Vermont teachers work hard. Teachers are not to blame for our reading crisis. They need training and mentors to help them change their methods to what research shows works best for teaching reading. They need support in ways to keep track of which child knows what sounds and who is struggling to read. Our Agency of Education is offering on-line classes with information about this. This is not enough. Our teachers need live mentors, whom they can trust to share the real life behaviors and concerns that come up in class. With a mentor, a teacher can take risks to change familiar methods. As changes happen, teachers will see student behaviors improve. Feeling successful, teachers will want to stay in this profession. Seeing a student's face light up when they know they have read, not guessed, a passage is so rewarding!

Readers who struggle with decoding text often find it helpful to learn to encode text—to spell. In the panel discussion after the Vermont screening of the “Truth about Reading” film, the main adult character who learns to read as part of the film, commented that spelling was the most helpful to him in learning to read. So did Julia Spaulding, a high school student who is a former Council on Literacy member.

Dr. Reid Lyon notes that a failure to recognize and help our young struggling readers can [lead to motivational and emotional problems](#) with lifelong consequences.¹⁴

In an interview with Children of the Code, Dr. Lyon states, [“Basically what it points to is that children, like all of us, tend to move away from what brings about shame. Moving away from print is almost second order to moving away from feeling shame...”](#)¹⁵ Continuing,

¹³ Children of the Code, <https://childrenofthecode.org>, [Interview Dr. G. Reid Lyon](#) – Converging Evidence – Reading Research What It Takes To Read, Sept. 11, 2003.

¹⁴ Reading Rockets, <https://www.readingrockets.org/>, G. Reid Lyon: The Reading Process, Apr. 25, 2014.

¹⁵ Children of the Code, <https://childrenofthecode.org>, [Interview Dr. G. Reid Lyon](#) – Converging Evidence – Reading Research What It Takes To Read, Sept. 11, 2003.

“When kids are hesitant, disfluent, inaccurate, slow and labored in reading, that is very visible to their peers and remember the peers, the other kids, again look at reading as a proxy for intelligence. It doesn’t matter if this kid is already a genius and can do algebra in the second grade, reading produces particular perceptions. Better said, lousy reading produces a perception of stupidity and dumbness to peers and clearly to the youngster who is struggling. That is the shame.”

Anxiety is the most frequent emotional symptom reported by both children and adults with dyslexia. For students who struggle to read at grade level, every school day can bring feelings of anxiety, frustration, and shame.¹⁶ Students with learning disabilities have a three times higher risk of attempting suicide.¹⁷ While suicide notes are only left in 7% of suicides, eighty nine percent (89%) of suicide notes contain dyslexic-type spelling errors.¹⁸ Vermont performing artist and educator [Lida Winfield](#) states in her “In Search of Air: Growing up Dyslexic” performance, “I would rather be angry, sad, heartbroken, or anxious than feel the isolation and hopelessness of feeling – dumb.”¹⁹

Long Term Impacts on Children

What are the long-term consequences of not remediating this inequity in Vermont’s education system?

Two-thirds (2/3) of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare.²⁰ Nationally, 75% of prison inmates are functional illiterate. Nearly 48% of prison inmates in Texas are dyslexic.²¹ Dyslexia is so prevalent in prisons that dyslexia screening is a provision in the 2018 Federal criminal justice reform law, [First Step Act](#).²² Governor Howard Dean observed, “The truth is that in our prisons, 85-90% of the inmates are dropouts, most because they never could figure out how to read.”²³

¹⁶ International Dyslexia Association, [Social and Emotional Problems Related to Dyslexia](#), Pikesville, MD, 2022.

¹⁷ Daniel, S.S., Walsh, A.K., Goldston, D.B., Arnold, E.M., Reboussin, B.A. and Wood, F.B. Suicidality, School Dropout and Reading Problems Among Adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(6):507-514, 2006.

¹⁸ McBride, H.E.A. and L.S. Siegel, L.S. Learning Disabilities and Adolescent Suicide. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30(6):652-659, 1997.

¹⁹ Winfield, Lida, [Vimeo video: In Search of Air: Growing up Dyslexic Promo](#), 2015. For more information on Lida Winfield, please see: <https://www.lidawinfield.com/keynote>

²⁰ Harvard Graduate School of Education, [Reach Every Reader. Why Reading?](#) Harvard University, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA, 2023.

²¹ Moody, K.C., Holzer, C.E 3rd, M.J. Roman, K.A. Paulsen, D.H. Freeman, M. Haynes, T.N. James. Prevalence of Dyslexia among Texas Prison Inmates. *Texas Medicine*, 96(6):69-75, June 2000.

²² James, Nathan, The First Step Act of 2018: An Overview, Congressional Research Service Report R45558, March 4, 2019.

²³ Wellington, Todd. “Governor Talks Education”, *Caledonian Record*, April 1, 1999, p. 1A

Resources for Understanding the Science of Reading

A [booklet summary of the National Reading Panel report](#) is available from the NICHD.

Dr. G. Reid Lyon, former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institute of Health (NIH), has a short question and answer essay about applying reading research to instruction (Upon request I can send you his PDF file: ANSWERS-TO-SOME-SPECIFIC-QUESTIONS-ABOUT-READING-INSTRUCTION.pdf). The important take aways are:

1. The importance to teach all the components that empirical research has shown to be effective (phonemic awareness, phonics skills, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension [Question 1] and later, writing and spelling [encoding] [Question 7]), and
2. “[Question 3] But the critical point here is the type of instruction that is provided must be based on the student's response to it. And that can only be determined by the application of assessment and progress monitoring techniques. [RtI]”).

Dr. Timothy Shanahan, [Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a member of the National Reading Panel](#), has an education blog with common sense advice and insightful observations about teaching reading. Dr. Timothy Shanahan in his education blog entitled, [“Is Emily Hanford Right?”](#) observes:

“Studies show that explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction consistently provide a learning advantage. There are no such studies supporting 3-cueing. ...”

“There are many ways to teach reading. It is sophistry, however, to pretend that these ways are all equal. Phonics provides a clear advantage.

To those who claim that we need different ways of teaching decoding (e.g., pictures, context) since all children are different, show me the research.

Until such research is available, I’m willing to follow this claim to its logical conclusion. Let’s say that I’m willing to entertain the idea that all children learn differently. If that is the case, then why aren’t these critics up in arms about programs that omit or minimize phonics given that research has found such omissions to be especially harmful to our most vulnerable children? Their position seems to be not just inconsistent, but hard hearted and downright mean.”

Earlier he stated (like Dr. G. Reid Lyon), “I understand why one would want to ensure that children receive comprehensive reading instruction – I’ve argued for comprehensiveness for decades. Teaching children all the skills that research has identified as beneficial to learning seems like the most-likely-to-be-successful approach one could take.”

<https://app.box.com/s/21gdk2k1p3bnagdfz1xy0v98j5yt11wk>

The second post ends with an excellent summary of the importance and limitations of phonics instruction:

“But let’s be perfectly honest. There have been entire generations that have learned to read English without phonics instruction. Research studies show that kids who have been taught little more than word memorization have learned to read.

...

Phonics helps many kids to figure out decoding earlier and easier than would be the case without it, and there are kids who would never figure it out without that help (like those kids on PBS). For them, phonics is truly essential.

That sounds pretty straightforward. Some kids need phonics instruction, and some can get by without it. So, all that teachers need to do is identify who will benefit from what and then provide such teaching.

But that’s the crux of the problem. We have no way of sorting out ahead of time who needs phonics, who would gain some benefit, and who would do fine without it. [*emphasis added*]

This is similar to the issues of vaccination. We don’t know which kids are going to be exposed to polio and who is susceptible to it, so we vaccinate everyone.

...

The reading experts were not wrong in their claim that kids can learn to read in other ways (e.g., without explicit phonics instruction), but they missed the point that those other ways hadn’t served these children well.

Phonics instruction needs to be a universal element of reading instruction in the primary grades, and primary grade teachers need to know how to teach phonics. That protects the largest number of children.

The RTI Action Network also has a website with information about RtI. For information on using RtI for the identification of SLD, see: <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/ld>

See: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/3>

Unfortunately, the inequity in the reading education of Vermont's children with disabilities also extends to children from families with lower socio-economic status. Education is so important for these children.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) report](#) notes that their motivation to defining equity is simple: “children from wealthier families may find many open doors to a successful life, but **children from poor families often have just one chance in life – and that is a good teacher and school that give them an opportunity to develop their potential.**” (p. 19, *emphasis added*).

What I am doing when I tutor is not simple or intuitive. I am teaching a specific sequence of skills to directly explain how the code for reading works. Our teacher training programs can provide new teachers with these skills to teach struggling readers. All readers will benefit when teachers understand the science of reading.

I worked with a ninth grader in central Vermont who couldn't spell, or correctly capitalize and punctuate. He was failing all subjects. Instead of getting help, his teachers gave him Fs. They refused read his typed papers because of his errors. After two months of structured literacy tutoring, he told me, “I was waiting until I was old enough to be able to drop out, but now I think I'll finish high school.” He continued tutoring for the rest of the year and later did graduate from high school.

Parents have come to me concerned not only about their children's academics, but about their behaviors. Their children are acting out, feeling so frustrated. They misbehave a bit at school, but their behavior is much worse at home. Parents describe children who shout, spit, throw chairs, and break things. One mother told me that her middle-school student broke a sheetrock wall. But structured literacy tutoring can dramatically change this! After two months of structured literacy tutoring, that boy who smashed his walls in frustration saw himself making progress in reading. He redirected this negative energy by asking for homework to do between his tutoring sessions. He wanted to make even more rapid progress. As he gained the skills needed to do his schoolwork successfully, his behavior continued to improve. Acting out can be a cry for help.

Another student, a Fourth grader, hid under the table when he came in for his structured literacy lessons at school. He was very bright, and had worked very hard to read. Why couldn't he read? His answer for himself was that he was stupid. Ne, he was not! He needed the skills broken down sequentially for him. I sat under the table with this child until he had built enough trust, by using flash cards and key words, to work with me and his teachers

I had a third grader who struggled in reading and needed more targeted instruction than that provided in her classroom. Fortunately for her, I was hired through her school to provide the direct, sequential and explicit instruction that she needed and wanted. Once the school funding ran out, her parents saw the need for continued tutoring, so her grandparents paid for the lessons. I taught this girl for three years. At the start she was very anxious. In class, she refused to work with other children. She was visibly depressed and often refused to go to school. She was

frequently tardy because of battles at home to avoid school. I observed her in class just sitting stiffly.

This child was a different person in our lessons. When I asked her why she didn't work with her classmates, she said, "I don't want them to see my handwriting or my spelling, and I can't read out loud." She also couldn't read the books her peers were reading. They were flying through the American Girl series, and all she could do was look at the pictures during silent reading time, pretending to read. As our literacy lessons proceeded, she became more confident. Her relationships with peers improved. She started participating in class, proud that she read a simple chapter book to herself. On the playground, she began playing jump rope and other games.

For this student and others who struggle to read, the damage to self-esteem is life-long, though. She refuses to read in public. She knows she reads slowly, probably the result of having missed the best age for learning to read. Working with parents of struggling readers, I find that they can be reluctant to read to their children, because they know they are inaccurate. Why would these parents read accurately? They had been taught to guess by pictures and first letters, a poor and inaccurate strategy. This legislation is to address a decades-long Vermont problem.

For so many of the children I've tutored, these direct, sequential structured lessons are literally life changing. Not only are the parents and teachers grateful, the students themselves verbalize their appreciation. I am proud to be offered tutoring recommendations from junior high students, talking about how glad they are to be able to spell, and to write out their thoughts. How they enjoy escaping into books or reading websites on their electronic devices.

We need to consider the lifelong impact of poor literacy skills. Passing our students along from grade to grade and ultimately graduating them from high school does not necessarily mean their reading is adequate to the tasks they are asked to do. For example, they need to read messages from co-workers, or information that pops up on machines indicating what to fix. Filling out forms with information for doctor appointments, writing checks, paying bills, reading reports and participating in Town Meeting and other public functions all require proficient reading. Lacking this skill is embarrassing and cripples an individual's independence.

Struggling readers and non-readers find work-arounds that hide the lack of reading skills. A mechanic, who could not read, would bring the repair manual home at night so a family member could read the information aloud to him. Sometimes he'd say, "Read that part again," He was memorizing the sequence of steps that a reader could review visually. At work, he would work under the hood, asking a trusted peer to read aloud the written repair instructions. I know this person well. He was very bright, but never taught reading skills in a way that worked for him. This is embarrassing and damages self-esteem; it is a shameful, sad coping skill.

Teaching children to read is most effective in grades PreK-2.

At this stage, brain development is optimized for learning oral and written language. An evidence-based approach, structured literacy,²⁴ includes phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding and spelling), fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Structured literacy – explicit, direct, sequential and cumulative instruction – is proven best practice.²⁵ The primary goal is to *prevent* reading difficulties *before* these become barriers to learning.

The current system for identifying students who need reading intervention is not working. Students are identified much too late (Please see graphs in the Early Literacy Assessment packet.)

Identifying and providing effective evidence-based services SAVES money. Remediation after grade 3 can require 10-40 times the instruction on the same concepts. For emotional and financial reasons, we need to screen our children and provide effective intervention right away. We need to monitor their progress, and reteach what is confusing them.

Every VT school needs to use valid, reliable assessments grounded in scientifically-based reading research. The Advisory Council on Literacy 2023 report (p. 9) recommends that we select valid and reliable assessments.

When assessments are used in these early years, we are not identifying a learning disability. Instead we are trying to find all the students who have gaps in their reading skills. When teachers and interventionists use this data to fill reading gaps, the students become proficient readers. With appropriate Tier I instruction, many will not need special education. We have seen drops in the numbers of Vermont children needing IEPs where schools using direct, sequential structured literacy from the start.

We want students to love to read. We all want that. But currently we are failing to provide this for two-thirds of our students. Giving children books is fine, but not enough. We need to couple those motivational books with effective Structured Literacy instruction. We need to be sure each child is building and retaining skills. We need to watch their Response to Intervention.

When children can't decode books, they can't love to read, because they can't read.

I am happy to answer any questions at any time. I had trouble formatting this document. If the footnotes do not match the resources, please contact me. I can find the correct citations for you.

Thank you for your concern about Vermont literacy problems.

²⁴ Spear-Swerling, L. (2019). [Here's why schools should use structured literacy](#). International Dyslexia Association.

²⁵ Reading Rockets. (2023). [Typical reading development](#).