

To: Members of the Vermont Legislature
From: Abby Roy
Date: April 25, 2024
RE: Testimony before the Vermont House Education Committee

My name is Abby Roy. I am a school psychologist currently working as an evaluator at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston. Previously, I worked in public schools in the Chicagoland area. I have extensive training and certification in structured literacy which is the teaching practice that corresponds to the science of reading. I know firsthand that acquiring the knowledge to teach foundational reading effectively is a time-consuming but worthwhile undertaking. It represents a particular challenge for those teachers who must shift the practices that they have employed for many years. This is why I will focus my testimony on the importance of effective implementation of S 204, highlighting the need to strengthen the capacity of the Agency of Education to support our school districts and teachers.

Significant changes are proposed in S 204, at a time when financial pressure on our school budgets is high, and our Agency of Education is spread thin. It is understandable that some may say “not now,” but I believe that by taking the long view and investing in a clear commitment to student reading equity, we will actually help to address these very issues: The bill’s effective implementation in K-3 will help student reading AND reduce costs through prevention of failure.

Research indicates that the time and cost associated with remediating foundational reading skills after third grade is significantly more than in earlier grades.¹ In addition to the time required to provide direct reading instruction by a qualified professional, many schools in Vermont default to providing paraprofessionals for very bright children in middle school because these students cannot read proficiently. Science-aligned core reading instruction will prevent the social-emotional toll of reading failure *and* reduce the number of children requiring expensive intervention based upon their reading difficulties. Effectively implemented, the legislation will reduce over-identification of learning disabilities in reading, because as it stands now, it is difficult to disentangle a true disability from a lack of appropriate instruction.

If we want reading success for every student in Vermont, two things are crucial:

1. The Agency of Education staff and the Council on Literacy membership must reflect in-depth knowledge of the science of reading. Currently, there are a couple of “lone voices” who have the depth of expertise to build reliable resources and provide recommended approaches for reading improvement.

If the AOE will be tasked with recommending appropriate assessment tools, approving professional learning programs, and advising the State Board of Education on pre- and in-service teaching training programs, it is only fair that the hardworking staff at the Agency also be supported in building capacity, internal and/or in partnerships, to ensure that work will be effective. Furthermore, such expertise can help guide school districts to leverage Title II funds to offset implementation costs. Similarly, if the Literacy Council is to be successful in advising the Secretary of Education, then it must include more reading science experts who can collaborate with state-wide stakeholders to support the implementation of S 204.

2. Specific language in the bill matters greatly. The changes to S 204 reflected in the document you received may make the difference between an ineffective effort that allows half-measures, and a clear roadmap for effective implementation that leads to improved outcomes. The included rationales are sufficient for many changes, and Bud Myers discussed the importance of disaggregating the data last week in his testimony. I want to address some of the more nuanced language changes.
- **P. 1 line 2 add *systematic, explicit*.** Adding these terms will clarify that not all approaches based on “evidence-based practices” employ the explicit and systemic approach which is crucial to the development of foundational reading skills for the majority of children. Brief definitions are included here:
 - Explicit: directly taught and modeled with opportunities for guided practice.
 - Systematic: instruction moves from simple to complex and common to less common.
 - **P. 1 line 19 add *reliable, valid, and change reviewed to recommended*; P. 6 line 14 change *reviewed to recommended*.** Reliable and valid are easily defined age-old terms in the field of assessment. Reliability and validity ensure that test results can be reasonably replicated and that they measure what they purport to measure. It is crucial to change *reviewed* to *recommended*. The AOE’s current list of *reviewed* assessments includes those that emphasize the disproven 3-cueing methods. Many do not assess foundational reading skills which is contrary to the very purpose of the bill. School districts are looking for clear guidance from the AOE on what practices are best for their students, and as noted earlier in my testimony, the Agency may need to expand its capacity to be able to recommend a flexible set of valid, effective choices.
 - **P. 7 line 5: *change skilled to trained*.** Our schools are full of skilled teachers who adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners. In contrast, training in how to teach foundational literacy skills provides the depth of knowledge required to provide systematic and explicit instruction. Furthermore, training teachers to guide classroom implementation and provide feedback as their practices shift will be make or break. Research has shown that coaching is a critical component of professional development transfer to the classroom. ⁱⁱ
 - **P. 13 lines 8-9 add *have been trained in an evidence-based literacy program*; P. 15 line 6 change *best practices to evidence-based practices*.** We all agree that it is best to use teaching practices that are supported by evidence. Yet it is the careful interpretation of the evidence that will allow for the successful implementation of S 204. It is easy for well-intentioned educators to unwittingly succumb to evidence-based claims that do not actually advance students’ reading proficiency. Our state has a cadre of individuals with a depth of knowledge about reading science who stand ready to support this implementation by interpreting the assessments, vetting curricula, and ensuring meaningful professional development opportunities. For these reasons, I would suggest adding a statement to clarify the term evidence-based throughout the document to include *evidence-based as determined by an expert in scientific research on effective reading instruction*.

I urge not only that the House pass S 204 but crucially, that the capacity for its effective implementation be built so that Vermont students and teachers can benefit from the House's clarity of purpose on reading improvement.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on this very important topic. I look forward to your questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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ⁱ Torgesen, J. (2009). Preventing Early Reading and Its Devastating Downward Spiral. National Center for Learning Disabilities.

ⁱⁱ Desimone, L. & Pak, K. (2017) Instructional Coaching as High-Quality Professional Development, *Theory Into Practice*, 56:1, 3-12