

TO: Vermont Senate Education Committee  
FROM: Dorinne Dorfman, Ed. D., Ed. S., Fulbright Scholar,  
Board Member of the International Dyslexia Association - Northern New England Alliance  
RE: **Support for S.204, An Act Relating to Reading Assessment and Intervention**  
DATE: Friday, January 5, 2024

Contact:

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### Testimony

My name is Dr. Dorinne Dorfman and I have served Vermont's public schools as a teacher and principal since 1995. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the needs of Vermont students in literacy and for considering the newly-introduced bill, S.204 An Act Relating to Reading Assessment and Intervention. It was only in 2019 that I became acutely aware of the scope and depth of reading problems in our state, when I was a learning plan coordinator for students outside of special education. These dear students had mental health and behavioral problems. They had Attention Deficit Disorder and Emotional Disturbance. And most of them could not read. They could not learn in academic subjects and were being passed along. A deep dive into their cumulative files revealed that their reading deficits had been noted since preschool or kindergarten, when they did not know all their letters or letter sounds and it grew worse from there. Students and parents came out of the woodwork asking for help, and some finally received appropriate screening *as seniors*. In response I pursued my third graduate degree in education to become a reading specialist, where I learned to teach structured literacy. I needed to be part of the solution for 95% of Vermont children to read on grade level, from the mere 33%

we have now. I am very proud to do my part in my third year at the Barre Unified Union School District, teaching middle-school students metalinguistics and watching them grow.

Structured literacy is grounded in scientific reading research that has been validated across thousands of studies around the world. This curriculum and instruction is direct, explicit, systematic, and cumulative in teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension.

Some people would like to believe that our children, in fact, can read. The tests are the problem; they just don't measure what our Vermont students can do. I am stating here and now that the tests are accurate. We have the years of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Program, and local assessments, like Renaissance Star, Track My Progress, NWEA MAP, and others. These tests all indicate significant reading deficits in our student population, though these do not provide prescriptive recommendations for instruction. Teachers need highly precise data to tell them what to teach. That's what S.204 is about.

I urge you to go into any school and experience what most of our teachers are enduring every day. Come in and watch children try to write a complete sentence, try to spell a multisyllabic word. Go to any grade level. Look at our students' handwriting, their keyboarding skills, their grammar and mechanics. Ask them to read aloud to you, to spell common words and academic vocabulary, and you will feel the urgency for change that I'm talking about. You may watch them look at the first letter, guess the rest, and look at your face to see if they got the word right. They may be looking at the pictures for clues because they can't decode. They have

internalized the debunked 3-cueing system. S.204 will bring this practice, which is still widespread in our state, to a halt.

I have assessed high school students without learning plans who did not know all the letter sounds in just our 26 letters, not to mention all 44 speech sounds in the English language. I have measured secondary students whose phonemic awareness was stuck at the 1st-grade level. Students' spelling shows gaps in phonological awareness, not even understanding the sounds within words, confusing /k/ and /g/ and /f/ and /v/, unable to recognize syllables in words, and too often lost in orthography, unable to spell United States of America or suffixes such as *-tion*, *-ous*, and *-ture*.

Last spring I visited Hazlehurst and Jackson, two of the poorest communities in Mississippi, which lies among the most impoverished states in our country. I went because of the tremendous growth in elementary school reading performance, moving from the bottom in 2000 to tying with Vermont in 2022, ranking 21st for 3rd-grade reading. I went because I was tired of hearing Vermonters list all the barriers to students learning to read on grade level, without reflecting on our gaps in instructional practices that prevent many children from learning. As a principal for 11 years, I did not know about reading science, and so I could not help my students, and Lord knows, I tried, as my many colleagues can attest. In Mississippi I observed literacy instruction and intervention as well as interviewed school and state leaders. I brought home ten findings to share with colleagues in Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire, which you can read in my attached report. Mississippi's children have nearly three times the poverty rate of Vermont's (28% to 10% in 2022), but their low-income students outperform our low-income students by 10

points on the NAEP. Middle-high income students in Mississippi score 9 points higher than their Vermont counterparts. We have much to learn and a lot to do for our children.

What will S.204 do to help? First, it requires scientifically-based screening in the foundations of reading, as found on pages 2 and 3 of the bill. A more detailed description of each of these measures can be found attached to this testimony. When screeners are scientifically valid and reliable, different teachers administering them to the same child will measure the same skills and will arrive at the same results. Administered within the first 30 days of school, the screeners remove the guesswork and flag K–3 students to immediately receive targeted reading instruction. This is the optimal time neurologically for reading development. This can avoid the very expensive, yearslong remediation required to address the same deficits later on. Remember that vocabulary growth after third grade mostly comes from reading, so you can just imagine the gaps in oral language and academic competencies experienced by our struggling readers in upper elementary and secondary school, which can be further exacerbated by the well-documented association between poor reading, anxiety, and depression. Kindergarten and first-grade students unable to make progress despite evidence-based instruction will be administered a dyslexia screener. Key to S.204 is that all students with reading deficits will receive explicit, targeted instruction in the areas of weakness. For example, students with poor phonemic awareness can finally progress in reading and spelling because their underlying deficits will be successfully remediated.

I want to call attention to page 4 in the bill, Section (d). On line 7, it reads:

*Each student who exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading **at any time** ...*

Now jump to line 10, where it continues about students above third grade. I will repeat and then continue:

*Each student who exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading **at any time** ...*

*... through statewide end-of-year assessments, **shall** be given intensive general education reading intervention **immediately** following the identification of the reading deficiency.*

Now we're talking grades 4 through 12. This is a great provision of the bill, because we *can't* ignore these kids. We should never say, "Sorry, you're too old to get help." Instead S.204 says, "We see your struggle. We're going to teach you to read and write at grade level and invest in the future you deserve." Many of these students have no diagnosis and may not qualify for special education, but this bill is *not about labeling*. This is about *learning to read*, the most important skill that schools worldwide teach to children and secure for the next generation.

If passed, the other provisions of this bill would be very helpful. The Vermont Agency of Education vetting screeners based on reading science and covering the cost of purchasing and managing data will support our schools' success in administration and reporting. Communicating with parents and guardians straight away; involving them in developing a reading improvement plan; describing the instructional services designed to remedy identified areas of reading deficiency, and learning ways to help at home will help improve student reading skills. However Vermont can do more than require screening, as our teachers need training in the foundations of reading in order to correctly apply student data to their teaching and flex their instructional strategies if students fail to make gains. Our educator preparation programs have a colossal role to play in preparing new teachers to experience student success starting on Day 1 and live the

joys of teaching children to read as I do now, keeping them dedicated to the field. We have fine examples in other states, in Ontario, of what more we can do, and S.204 is a fine starting point. I would be happy to answer your questions about this bill, about reading science, and what more Vermont can do. Thank you.

## Appendix

### **Appendix A: S.204 Universal Screeners: Skills for Assessment**

Provided by Abby Roy, M.A., NCSP, CAGS, A/OGA, Nationally Certified Psychologist

*K–3 Screening for All Students*

<b>Skill Area</b>	<b>Why is it Important</b>
Letter Sound & Naming Fluency	The ability to identify letter names and associate letters with their sounds is strongly correlated with later reading success
Phonemic Awareness*	The ability to manipulate sounds in words (phonemes) with automaticity (within 2 seconds) is essential to reading and spelling development. If you cannot accurately perceive the sounds orally, then you cannot map them to letters.
Decoding Accuracy (real & nonwords)	Using nonwords permits the evaluation of phonics knowledge and ensures that students are not relying on memorization or guessing
Decoding Fluency (real & nonwords)	If students cannot read single words fluently (accurately and quickly), then they devote too many cognitive resources to figuring out the word and reading is slow and effortful. When decoding is inefficient, comprehension is often negatively impacted.
Oral Reading Fluency	Oral reading fluency is considered a good general outcome measure of reading achievement.
Handwriting	Writing letters by hand serves to reinforce letter-sound knowledge by activating kinesthetic learning, which is our earliest, strongest, and most reliable memory channel. If students cannot form their letters accurately or efficiently, they cannot represent their thoughts in print.

Spelling	Spelling is a window into one’s phonemic awareness or their understanding of how sounds are represented in print. Students who struggle to spell will avoid writing words in their oral language. For example, a poor speller might write “mad” when they want to say “enraged” thereby limiting their ability to express themselves in written format.
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*Additional Areas for Dyslexia Screening:*

Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN) tasks measure the ability to retrieve language labels for familiar information (i.e., colors, letters, etc..) from memory with automaticity and accuracy, an important skill for reading and writing with fluency. Children who are not able to retrieve language labels from memory with accuracy and efficiency devote a disproportionate amount of energy to lower-level skills instead of to the content itself. Slow RAN is correlated with the need for additional exposure to new material to reach mastery.

\* Phonological awareness refers to an umbrella set of skills that generally develop in a sequence from simple to complex (i.e., rhyming, blending, onset-rhyme, segmentation, deletion, and substitution) and includes the ability to understand and perceive that words are made up of syllables and sounds. Phonemic awareness is specific to awareness of individual sounds in words. (A dyslexia screener includes a battery of tests in addition to those included in a universal screener.)

**Appendix B: Comparisons Between Mississippi and Northern New England**

*Figure 1. Grade Four Reading Scores in Northern New England and Mississippi, 2002 - 2022*

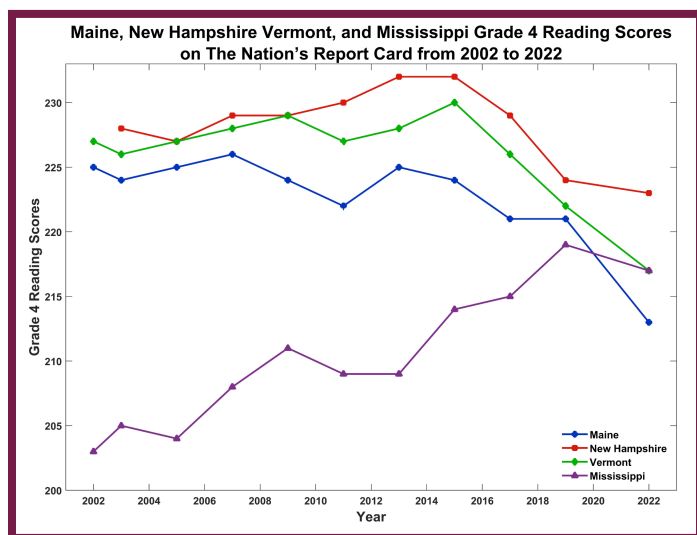


Figure 2. Comparison of 4th-grade Reading Performance in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Mississippi, and Nationally on the National Assessment of Educational Progress

Average NAEP Reading Scores of 4th Graders	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2013	225	232	228	209	222
2022	213	223	217	217	216
2022 Percentage at or above grade level (score of 3 or 4)	29.2%	37%	33.6%	30.6%	32%
2013 - 2022 Change in performance	-12	-9	-11	+8	-6

Figure 3. Reading Performance of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced-price Lunch, Childhood Poverty, and Per Pupil Expenditure

Reading Performance, Poverty Indicators and Per Pupil Expenditure	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2019 Percentage of 4th graders reading on grade level, who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch*	23.2%	21.3%	21.4%	25.9%	21.1%
2019 Percentage of Pre-K-12 students who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch	42%	24.7%	35.1%	74.8%	52.1%
2022 Childhood poverty rate	13.8%	8.9%	10.2%	28.1%	17%
2022 Public education per pupil expenditure	\$15,700	\$17,500	\$21,200	\$9,300	\$14,840

\*Most recent figures available

Figure 4. Comparison of 4th-grade Reading Performance on the NAEP by Eligibility for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch

Average NAEP Reading Scores of 4th Graders	Maine	New Hampshire	Vermont	Mississippi	National Average
2022 Not eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	223	228	227	236	231
2022 Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	197	204	202	212	203
Difference in scores between the two demographic groups	26	24	25	24	28