



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date: January 10, 2024

Subject: Senate Bill 204; Literacy and Reading Instruction

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director Vermont Principals' Association.

First, thank you to Senators Gulick and Hashim for signing on to this bill and Senate Education in general for its strong interest over the last few legislative sessions in looking to assist schools in improving instruction and ultimately outcomes in reading performance for our students.

Section 1:

The VPA supports the concept of Universal Screeners to be identified and published by the Agency of Education. We ask that while the Agency continues to identify appropriate screeners, they take careful stock of what districts already have in place as Universal Screeners. Systems that have effective screening mechanisms in place should not have to make unnecessary changes. Screeners being available at no cost is very important as it ensures we don't unwittingly disadvantage school districts with less financial resources.

The requirements for the screener are aligned with previous work that resulted in Act 28 of 2021 and is supported by the work of the Advisory Council on Literacy. I am especially heartened by the requirement that the universal screening process be "brief." Obviously, there will be some students that will need additional screening and in some cases further diagnostic assessment, however, a strong universal screener can easily assist professional educators in a manner that can change instruction to better meet the needs of each individual student and focus on any reading deficiencies that should be addressed sooner rather than later.

Two concluding thoughts:

1. I think it makes sense to make sure the Advisory Council on Literacy does not sunset; with research and application changes in the field, it is important to have a group who oversees and continues to make sure that literacy improvement is front and center in Vermont, and;
2. The language in the last sentence, "which a school reading specialist shall provide," may be too restrictive. School reading specialist is an endorsement. I would feel more comfortable with language that is less restrictive. The key is that the services are provided by someone who is qualified to provide those services. I'm a big fan of reading specialists, but I don't want something to inadvertently occur that would actually restrict potential services to students.

Final comments:

Let's be very careful about prescribing anything that would be considered curriculum or requiring a certain program to be used. There are a ton of commercial for profit groups out there that sell screening programs, curriculum packages, etc. who all claim to be able to produce better reading results and often develop their own paid for research that supports their product.