

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Dr. Mat Forest, Director of Student Services
St. Johnsbury Academy
DATE: February 29, 2024
RE: Written Testimony S.204 and S.303

I am Dr. Mathew Forest. I joined St. Johnsbury Academy in 2019, where I serve as the Director of Student Services. In that role, I oversee special education services. I'm a licensed educator, and former principal and superintendent in the public school system. Immediately prior to joining the Academy, I served as Superintendent of the Caledonia Central Supervisory Union for five years.

I appreciate the opportunity to join the committee today as you consider how to tackle one of our most significant challenges across the State of Vermont, ensuring our students receive much needed literacy instruction to set them on a path for lifelong success.

Last year I testified in this committee to highlight the issue and provide an overview of the literacy program that we have established at the Academy as a result of the challenges we were seeing with students entering the 9th grade. All too often, students enter high school with reading and writing skills at the 3rd or 4th grade levels. We have a short time period during high school to help them catch up and be ready for the next phase in their journey, whether that is college, the trades, military service, or other employment opportunities. It can be done, we are demonstrating success, but tackling this in the lower grades is critical moving forward.

As a brief reminder, we created a literacy program in 2021 and hired a full-time special educator trained in screening and assessment as well as a reading and writing specialist. We trained all teachers and paraeducators in special services in the Orton-Gillingham (OG) method, which is an evidence-based instructional methodology. We currently have three Level 1 OG instructors, and one reading/writing specialist on staff. We have made OG training available to our partners in our sending districts, and at this point have provided training to fifteen public school teachers in our sending districts. We hope to continue this partnership.

With our capacity to conduct screening and assessment, we have identified forty-three students over the last two years in need of intervention; these students were not previously identified by their sending districts. Students with these needs receive either one-on-one or very small group instruction. In addition, we offer a reading/writing lab staffed by our reading/writing specialist. This is available to all students. This year we have added a math lab available to all students, staffed by a special educator, as we see similar challenges with numeracy.

St. Johnsbury Academy supports the direction of S.204 and S.303. Our teachers and our school systems across the state are not prepared to meet this challenge. We would like to strengthen participation by approved independent schools in addressing literacy. It is important for all schools, including independent schools, to do their part. We have worked with the Vermont Independent Schools Association and have proposed language for the committee to consider.

This proposal requires approved independent schools to have a school literacy plan to ensure appropriate attention is given to improving literacy. S.303 requires licensed educators in public and approved independent schools to receive training in evidence-based literacy instruction, which we support. S.204 contains professional development requirements. Our proposal builds on the professional development provisions in S.204 and S.303 to ensure all teachers in all schools receive appropriate training based upon grade-level, role, experience, and prior training. The time frames in the proposal reflect the need for approved independent schools to develop literacy plans- which would be new for independent schools- as well as to implement professional learning requirements.

We propose the following language:

On or before January 1, 2025, an approved independent school shall develop a grade-level appropriate school literacy plan that is informed by student needs and assessment data. The plan may include but not be limited to, identification of a literacy vision, goals and priorities, measures and indicators, screening, assessment, instruction and intervention, progress monitoring, and professional development for all employed unlicensed teachers which may be differentiated by role and experience, and account for prior training. Professional development shall include explicit evidence-based literacy instruction where appropriate, based upon grade level, role, and experience. Teachers employed by an approved independent school shall complete a professional development program on or before January 1, 2027. Teachers hired by an approved independent school on or after January 1, 2026, shall complete a professional development program within one year of hire. An approved independent school shall maintain a record of completion of professional development consistent with this provision.