

Testimony of Blanche Podhajski, Ph.D.
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My name is Blanche Podhajski and I am President of the Stern Center for Language and Learning and a Clinical Associate Professor of Neurosciences at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine. Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today. I have worked in special education in Vermont for nearly 5 decades and the educational landscape has changed dramatically. When I founded the Stern Center in 1983, little did we know the extent of the research revolution in reading that would take place over the last 35 years. That is why as you debate this bill it is important for you to understand the critical importance of elevating the expertise of the general and special education workforce. The long awaited DMG and UVM reports both address this as does the recent release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and Smarter Balanced Assessment test scores that show we are seeing a decline in children's early literacy.

As you know from Child Count data, students with SLD constitute the highest incidence category. Of children with SLD, 85% of them have problems reading. In a multitiered system as we have in Vermont, it would not be uncommon for 60% of children to learn no matter how they are taught but 40% will have difficulty without explicit instruction. 40% of children do not have disabilities. They merely are the victims of inequity in instruction across income levels. Not all teachers have been provided with the knowledge to deliver the science of instruction in the classroom. fMRI studies have shown us unequivocally how to shift brain activity for students who struggle. It is critical that this information gets to those who can not only help close the achievement gap but also reduce special education costs – general and special educators.

I laud the legislature for considering other alternatives to fund special education that will allow for professional learning. My concern relative to Section 2969 of H897 is that not all professional learning is the same. We have lived through many cafeteria style programs to teach teachers in the interventions du jour without looking to the evidence. We need something with a longer shelf life – systems change models - that are grounded in scientific research. I want to share a four year study we did in Orleans North Supervisory Union (ONSU).

Now is the time for us to consider the collaborative potential of partners across higher education, the Agency of Education, district leaders, the legislature, and the Stern Center to develop a long term plan. Investing in the effectiveness of core reading instruction for students in both general and special education will ultimately reduce the number of students in Tier 2 and special education reading interventions. This is an issue of equity for which together we have a sustainable solution.