

Beth Cobb Superintendent
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We have a combined experience of 60 years working in Vermont Schools as classroom teachers (pre-k - 8th grade), special educator (pre-k - 12), instructional coach, graduate and undergraduate level instructors, Principal, Curriculum Directors and Superintendent. We come to you today speaking from these experiences as well as to speak with you about our current initiative in the Essex Westford School District.

Reading accountability is a high-level district outcome that is connected to creating a high elementary reading standard. The Essex Westford Continuous Improvement Plan has delegated one essential outcome to literacy. This outcome, “ *Every student will read on grade level by the end of grade 3*”, is a North Star for our District. This leads to an institutional commitment that all students reach their grade level reading standard, an assessment and reporting system that is aligned with the goal, and a major shift of organizational priorities and resources to achieve the growth needed to close our reading achievement gap. Our FY21 budget clearly shows our commitment to our K-5 literacy focus.

Like other policy changes, reading accountability and achievement should be clearly articulated, visible and be focused on supporting greater collective efficacy for tier 1 instruction and the professional learning community as a whole.

For Essex Westford, this work is most visible in:

- Administrator and staff discussing the differences between current reading levels and the reading goal in our district
- Increasing the importance of the initial reading baseline, subsequent assessments and the amount of growth needed to close the achievement gap
- Reallocating personnel and other resources to meet the reading needs in the early grades
- Analyzing reading improvement in classroom and at elementary meetings
- Creating systemic teaming protocols aligned with clearly articulated guaranteed and viable curriculum and providing the time for the teachers to do this
- Making collaborative staff decisions to eliminate lesser effective instructional techniques
- Conducting focused principal walkthroughs and providing feedback for teachers
- Involving and engaging parents/families in reading
- Reporting regularly through media to sustained community interest
- Regular and consistent monitoring of student progress toward our goals giving teachers, parents, students and administrators current objective data to make effective and timely decisions about instruction

Ultimately, reading accountability is an ends policy that creates a system change.

Reading accountability is not contingent upon a specific instructional program. When visiting a classroom what we should see are carefully aligned segments of effective instruction, that may or may not align with a prescribed program. Reading accountability is not seen by a casual classroom observer. In a classroom we might see and look for phonemic and phonological screening assessments, small reading groups, explicit

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phonics, rhyming charts, blending exercises, storytelling and story reading, reading journals, vocabulary instruction, comprehension and cognitive strategies, embedded phonics, cross age tutoring (a comprehensive, blended approach). These different reading practices, specialized teaching techniques and curriculum are synthesized into thousands of classroom instructional approaches. To address these components, our focus has been on synthesizing our instructional walkthroughs, and increasing our collective efficacy in data analysis through targeted coaching. Some of our schools are doing this internally and one of our schools has partnered with the Stern Center. The measures for data analysis give teachers, parents, students and administrators good objective data, and often for the first time for effective decision making.

There are proven practices with high probability of success and there are common elements or criteria that all good instructional programs should have at appropriate age levels. Essex Westford is adopting these practices. We know that Principals and teachers are highly motivated to seek out optimal programs as they become more accountable for these choices. The key to reading accountability is a consistent goal measured with the same tool across the district, these goals are then further unpacked at each grade level, to ensure that the skills identified in each grade level span guarantee adequate preparation for the subsequent grade.

Our teachers know that no single approach to teaching reading meets the needs of all children. All children learn differently. Therefore a teacher must have a deep foundation of techniques and strategies to be successful. Research on reading over the past 40 years has produced literally thousands of reports, and some of the most exciting research currently being done connects to this outcome. Unfortunately most of the research gets ignored unless it advances a particular side of the phonics/whole language conflict. This conflict over theories has no clear winners but certainly has losers, our children. Admittedly not all research is of equal merit and some of it reflects fads that are now outdated. Still a solid, thorough survey of the literature makes it clear that some practices are more effective than others. Teachers need to have a sound background in this research. It will provide a rich menu of options and save them from investing valuable time in reinventing already rolling wheels. Marilyn Adams in *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* states that “the data indicates that the ability to learn to read is remarkably independent of ethnicity, parental education and children’s IQ. Everything we can measure says it depends on what they learn, which means it depends on what we teach them.”

Teachers in elementary schools, especially those in K through three, need extensive exposure to observations of and practice in teaching reading. Dr. G. Reid Lyon, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Health, testified before the US House of Representatives committee on education in the workforce: “most teachers receive little formal instruction in reading development and disorders during either undergraduate and or graduate studies, with the average teacher completing only two reading courses. Surveys of teachers taking these courses indicate consistently that very few of them have ever observed professors demonstrating instructional reading methods with children; teachers also report that their coursework is largely unrelated to actual teaching practices, that the theories they learn are rarely linked to the actual instruction of children, and that the supervision of student teaching and practicum experiences is frequently lacking in consistency and depth.”

Teachers must have the opportunity to observe other teachers effectively teaching reading in a variety of classrooms. This provides a repertoire of examples to anchor the abstractness of college level preparatory programs on theory and pedagogy. Teachers should have ongoing professional development opportunities in structuring a balanced approach from the many different pedagogical methods available, that is connected directly to the current and needed skill set of their students. The components of reading, including phonemic awareness, word recognition skills/phonics, structural analysis, comprehension, vocabulary development,

literature-based approaches, the use of patterns, predictable readers, phonics-based text and other sources should be addressed. Reports from field practitioners and videotapes of the actual strategies in classroom use should be available for teachers to refer to.

Beginning reading programs should be designed to ensure that adequate instructional time is allotted to the teaching of phonemic awareness skills, phonics skills, the development of reading fluency, automaticity, and the development of reading comprehension strategies. All of these components of reading are necessary but not sufficient in and of themselves. For children demonstrating difficulty in learning to read, it is imperative that each of these components be taught with an integrated context and ample practice in reading familiar material. For some children, research demonstrates the explicit systematic instruction is crucial in helping them to understand and apply critical phonemic, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Even for children who seem to grasp reading concepts easily, learning to read is not a natural process. Reading instruction must be thoughtful and planned, and must incorporate the teaching of all of the critical reading skills. Major effort should be undertaken to ensure their teachers possess the expertise and commitment to foster learning opportunities that create a balanced approach to meet the needs of all children. Moreover, we must realize that no one study should be used to guide practice. The research that is used to guide policy and practice must inform us how the different components of reading behavior are best developed by utilizing various approaches to reading instruction. Teacher fluency in utilizing these approaches will ensure access to learning opportunities and acquisition of skills for children of different backgrounds, learning characteristics and literacy experiences.

If implemented with fidelity to purpose and theory, our current VTMTSS, Act 173 and the Education Quality Standards combine to provide Districts the roadmap to accomplish literacy goals. Districts should invest in a comprehensive system analysis and aligned improvement plan, focusing resources toward the literacy for all goal. Without closing the cultural and technical gaps that currently exist in Districts, no one policy or program will bring the results we all strive for. We can not remediate or specialize instruction ourselves out of our current achievement gap. We must address teacher preparation, ongoing support, balanced approaches and ongoing current formative and summative data analysis and action.

In Essex Westford we are investing in additional literacy coaches, collaboratively working in grade level spans to identify essential learnings (standards) in reading and then vertically aligning these. Soon these same teacher teams will begin the work of aligning instructional strategies and formative assessments to these standards and embark on the exciting journey of collaboratively matching assessment data to strategy and skill gaps at the first tier. This work will then more accurately inform next steps, and our teachers will be engaged in responsive plan, do, study act cycles of improvement for all learners. All teachers, administrators, support staff and others will target their work toward achieving these essential outcomes. We believe this focus on collective teacher efficacy will bring significant improvements to Essex Westford and our students. This comprehensive systemic approach is critical in moving us away from status quo. This shift focuses our District on learning, collaboration, and results that will radically improve student outcomes.