

**Testimony to House Education Committee
Vermont State Legislature**

**Karen Heath
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Good afternoon. Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for taking interest in Vermont children's literacy lives. As a life-long literacy educator, this topic is truly close to my heart.

My name is Karen Heath. I came to Vermont to go to Middlebury College in 1979, and have served Vermont children in schools since shortly after I graduated in 1983. I helped to get the Maplehill School in Plainfield up and running, and taught literacy there for many years, working with middle and high school students with severe learning deficits. I then spent 20 years in the Barre Schools, first as a grade 3-6 literacy teacher, and then as the literacy coordinator for the district, serving students from Pre-K -8th grade. I was responsible for overseeing all literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as all literacy professional development for the Barre Schools for 14 years. I also had the honor of representing our states' teachers as the Vermont Teacher of the Year in 2005. This experience, along with working on the National Common Core Work Group for several years, gave me invaluable insight into educational practices around the country. This past fall, I took a position at Main Street Middle School here in Montpelier, where I serve as the literacy interventionist, coach, and specialist. I am once again directly working with students each day for whom reading and writing is a struggle. I have had extensive literacy training over the years, with many special education courses, training in structured language, Leveled Literacy Intervention, and much, much more. I have spent years studying and practicing many approaches to literacy instruction. I believe the scope of my experience gives me both a birds' eye and on-the ground view on how laws pertaining to literacy assessment, instruction, and training might affect school systems, teachers, and most importantly, our students.

I am familiar with the testimony you have heard in the last couple of weeks, and will do my best not to repeat much of what already has been said, whether in support or in opposition to the bill. It is clear that those in support of the bill are genuinely concerned about some of our most struggling learners, as am I. However, I do have to say, given my experience, I have some strong concerns about the proposal.

Regarding **literacy screening** for all young students--this is essential. According to Vermont's Education Quality Standards (EQS), which is the guiding document from the Agency of Education for our schools, all schools are required to have a comprehensive assessment system. This includes literacy screening for all children, annually, and then further testing for students who are flagged by this screening. For young children, this should include phonemic and phonological awareness, and if students are dyslexic, existing screening would flag them. One version of the bill says in the spring of kindergarten students should be screened for dyslexia. At that age most students are just beginning to read, and many have come to kindergarten with little to no exposure to books or letters. In Barre City, a typical kindergarten class has numerous children for whom this is the case. Most of those students soar into being literate in their kindergarten years. We do need to give them a chance before giving them a label. Yes, we screen them, then we act on the information we receive. It is our jobs as educators to figure out how to help children with deficits. We do not need a legislative mandate--they do not exist for any other academic screening. If we are following Vermont's Educational Quality Standards, (EQS), we should be screening for early literacy skills, and as far as I know, all of the schools in Vermont do this. We have assessments, we identify students, and we follow an MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) model which ensures further and more targeted instruction for students who need it.

Mandated training. There is no question in my mind that most teachers, including myself with over 35 years of literacy teaching experience, can use more professional development in literacy. My question is what this might look like and how it would be accomplished. Professional development is most effective if it is embedded and ongoing. If this mandate would be for a one-day workshop on signs of dyslexia, it might raise a bit of awareness, but it will not change a teacher's practice. To be honest, all mandatory training I take part in each year (blood borne pathogens, mandatory reporting, etc.) ends up in a slide show we are expected to watch on our own time, and then we print a certificate saying we have completed the training. I find these slide shows good reminders of things we need to know if we work in schools, but they are not a deep dive into any topic. What would this mandatory training look like? Who would be trained? And how would it be funded? I hear that Friday you talked about creating regional grants for consultants to help with PD focusing on literacy. I would absolutely applaud that.

Mandatory Structured language instruction in all classrooms K-3. While I fully believe a solid sequential multi-sensory phonics program is essential in grades K and 1, I can tell you from experience, that many students no longer need that in 2nd and 3rd grade. Some do, of course, and a good teacher will continue to provide that instruction for those students. If a school has a strong vertically aligned curriculum, students should

be receiving sequential, multi-sensory phonics instruction in the early grades. But I can tell you from experience there are many 2nd and 3rd graders for whom 30-45 minutes of phonics instruction per day would be completely inappropriate and very boring. I have had 3rd grade students who were solidly ready to read long chapter books and analyze character, who could read as fluently as I can, who would have been bored out of their minds with phonics instruction, and it would be a real disservice to have this instruction mandated. What is mandated is proficiency-based teaching and learning aligned with the Common Core standards, and schools are expected to teach the Foundational Skills in reading, which is best done using the 5 pillars of reading instruction, just one of which is phonics. Though there absolutely is a science to getting words off the page, the purpose of reading is to make meaning of text, and a balanced approach to literacy is essential. Time is limited in schools--and time for literacy is precious. Word study should no doubt be part of it, but it cannot be the bulk of reading instruction.

The bottom line is we cannot afford to treat all students who come into school like they have a reading disability. We need to teach from strengths, not deficits. And we need to be responsive to those who have deficits, including offering extended systematic sequential phonics instruction for those who continue to need it.

I understand it is not your intention to mandate any specific curriculum, but as a teacher, that is what this presents as.

A **worrisome thought** about these proposed mandates--screening, training, and curriculum, is that it appears to be largely driven by one organization in our state who seems to hold a monopoly on the diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia. In my over 30 years teaching literacy in Vermont, I have seen hundreds of reports that have come out of this organization, and every single one has found the student to have a processing disorder. I can also say that each of these students is an individual, and while for some synthetic phonics has unlocked the key to reading, there have been plenty of others for whom this approach did not work. There are so many factors--background knowledge, motivation, comprehension, vocabulary, and more. Sometimes it is another piece of the puzzle that needs targeted instruction.

One of my former middle school students came to me crying because he was told by the said organization he could not read. I knew him well as a reader, and he had a multitude of strengths, especially with comprehension, though he had trouble getting smoothly through a page of text without errors. Yes, he had work to do, and had holes in his understanding of phonics, but as a bright young man, he had learned to make sense of text, to enjoy books, and to read almost at grade level. As teachers, our job is

to continue to help students like him on areas of deficit, but just as importantly, to build on strengths and make sure they know that yes, they CAN read.

I am concerned that this organization may be heavily lobbying this bill, and I do not believe it is in the best interest of all children. Though this is difficult to say, I am worried that they are trying to grow their business and to get into every school in Vermont, to the detriment of many of our children.

Finally, the neuroscience research is dismissing large pieces of educational research, which has been shared with you through Marge Lipson and others. Yes, it is important to know how the brain works and how we learn to read. But we cannot ignore the rest. The broader research on teaching reading shows that what works in classrooms is a balanced literacy approach, and it would be detrimental to children to lose that balance.

I know for certain this is an issue because parents really care about their kids. They have the best of intentions, and are worrying about their children, as we all do. And for those struggling with reading, this is a very real crisis, and those students absolutely should have access to the structured language instruction they need. But to say it is a crisis for all seems a bit manufactured. Students in Vermont score higher than most of the nation on the most recent NAEP test (in grade 4--only 3 states higher, in grade 8--only 2). Yes, we do want all students to be proficient, and we can always improve, but this narrow approach to improvement across the board is not the solution. As a state, we are doing well with teaching our students, and a big piece of this is the balanced approach to teaching reading that is prevalent in our schools. We cannot afford to let this go.

I welcome any questions and discussion so that we can help craft this idea and move it forward in a way that will truly help all students.

Thank you for your time.

