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Testimony to House Committee on Education

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Hello. My name is Dr. Rob Schulze, and I am the professor of special education and department chair of education at Northern Vermont University Johnson. I am pleased to speak on behalf of Northern Vermont University in regard to literacy education at the college and the proposed literacy bill.

In terms of how NVU prepares K-3 to teach literacy, we take a multi-year approach. At NVU we don't do separate elementary and special education training programs, but rather one inclusive childhood education degree, where all students graduate with both regular and special education endorsements. As such, there are multiple courses that focus only on literacy and several others where it is referenced.

Our literacy instruction begins in the first semester of the sophomore year with a course called Literature & Media for Children and Youth. This course is not in the teaching of reading but in some of the foundational skills which will build to that – an understanding of reading levels, the ability of teachers to do text complexity analysis, and an understanding of genre and engaging students to be interested in literacy. In the second semester of the sophomore year this continues with a course entitled Instructional Dynamics I, which is a course entirely around literacy instruction and which includes teaching practicum hours in a local school. The course

involves topics such as language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension. In addition to observing real-world literacy instruction in a public school, students must write a literacy lesson plan and teach it, gaining feedback from both faculty at the college and a cooperating teacher in a public school.

In the junior year, students take a course titled Foundations of Inclusive Practices which covers special education law and policy, interventions, and universal design. In this course students learn the characteristics and definitions of specific reading disabilities and the necessary remediations, including structured evidence-based interventions. (They don't *do* the interventions in this course, but they do learn that they are the proper way to proceed.) In the fall of the junior year students take a course called Literacy Intervention, which is our class specifically on how to systematically intervene with struggling and disabled readers. In this course students learn how to code and analyze children's reading in order to make personal intervention plans. They also study how to design evidence-based interventions, track ongoing data, and explore literacy interventions for ELL students. This is the course that most speaks to the proposed bills, I believe. At the same time, the students take a course in special education evaluation, where (among other things) they learn to administer, score and interpret the special education testing which is used to determine the presence of specific learning disabilities, and how to use that knowledge to create meaningful IEP goals which can guide intervention. This is important because they now have the full spectrum of knowledge of literacy – how to identify it, how to plan for it, how to write interventions, teach them, and then track the data to determine if they are working and, if not, to revise their practices.

Finally, in the senior year, students complete a 280-hour special education practicum in the fall semester. This is far more than the 60 hours the state requires. In this practicum, students work with a special educator to learn all the processes involved in the field, such as writing IEPs and collaborating with paraeducators, but students also teach literacy lessons to children with reading disabilities. What programs students use depends on the school in which they are doing the placement, but exposure to and use of programs such as Wilson Reading and Orton-Gillingham are most common. Finally, students do a full semester regular education student teaching experience in their final spring semester, where they teach full-class literacy lessons and work with students with disabilities in the regular education environment.

At one point, the proposed bills deliberated increasing the requirements for the colleges and universities in terms of teacher training for reading. I believe that you will find that most of the IHEs in the state will already be meeting those requirements simply because they are best practice. Increasing that mandate would not be onerous if that is how you decided to proceed.

In terms of the bill being proposed, I have some reactions. In the most recent copy which I have seen, which is based around grants for improved literacy instruction, I think that any funding and school focus on evidence-based literacy practices is always welcome. An emphasis on coaching is interesting, in that to my knowledge the qualifications and duties of a coach are nebulous – I do not think academic coaching is a bad investment, but since it is not an endorsement area in Vermont like other teaching positions, perhaps the Advisory Group or you yourselves could put some guidelines on what you are looking for in a literacy coach. Certainly, that person should themselves be required to have knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices.

Also, while the bill contains language pertaining to preschool through grade three, the mechanism for increasing the literacy outcomes is only through supervisory unions. Preliteracy skills, which are foundational to making literacy progress come kindergarten and first grade, are the purview of the preschools, and while I do not have any hard numbers, clearly many Vermonters send their children to private preschools. The 10 hours of public preschool the state provides are nice but they do not meet the requirements for many working families – in this I speak from experience. Families with parents or a parent who are out of the workforce can work around the limitations of the public preschool hours, but working families have no choice but to place their children in private centers who will provide a full, long day of coverage. In this bill, as far as I can tell, private preschools would not have any access to coaching or other improvement processes, nor would they be accountable for their preliteracy instruction. It may be that this simply is beyond the scope of what this bill is intended to accomplish, but if the goal is to improve literacy outcomes for everyone, at some point the instruction in private preschools will need attention.

In terms of other feedback, I also would encourage you to look at *who* is teaching students with specific learning disabilities in reading. The current language of the bill references the 2017 educational report, which also stresses having students learn from highly qualified instructors. The proposed literacy bill would strengthen systems for literacy and perhaps individual teacher skills for literacy, but that is of no value to students who receive their instruction not from licensed teachers but rather from paraeducators or other staff members who may not have completed a teacher preparation program or be included in a district's literacy improvement cycle. Many schools already have qualified teachers who understand

early literacy, but are they actually teaching the students or are they receiving their instruction from other staff members who do not have the qualifications? In my opinion, this is a serious issue in Vermont, with our documented high use of paraeducators in the public schools. Having the students with the highest levels of need receive instruction from people with the lowest levels of qualification is an ethical and educational disaster. This is an issue that the committee may wish to explore, or to include in the data gathering portions of the bills. Perhaps the grant applications can require applicants to list who actually is teaching literacy to their students, including via special education services. This way legislators may make more informed decisions on this issue at a later date.

I also would hope that the committee would consider the federal special education laws regarding eligibility and assessment. In an earlier version of the bill, screeners were a large part of them, leading (it seems to me) to identification and services. While screener tools can be used to gather information for all students, and can be done without any special permission, any testing to determine the presence of disability and to refer for specialized instruction (i.e. special education) needs advance parental consent. This involvement and consent of the parent is very important and I would not like to see it overlooked in Vermont schools.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.