

**TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO:** House Education Committee

**FROM:** Jensa Fradette Bushey, District Literacy Leader, Champlain Valley School District (CVSD)

**TOPIC:** Early Literacy Instruction in Vermont (grades K-4)

**DATE:** January 24, 2020

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Good afternoon and thank you for welcoming me to testify as the House Education Committee considers three bills about improving literacy instruction within the State of Vermont.

For the first 16 years of my career as an educator, I was a classroom teacher at Shelburne Community School. I taught across all grades K-5 within various grade configurations and then I became the Shelburne Community School literacy coach and coordinator. In July of 2019, I became the Champlain Valley School District, K-4 District Literacy Leader. I now work in the elementary schools of Williston, Shelburne, Hinesburg, and Charlotte. My responsibilities include designing and implementing professional development sessions, facilitating curriculum development, coaching teachers on lesson and unit development, and I lead a group of building-based literacy coordinators.

I also think it is important for you to know that I am a native Vermonter, that I was raised on a dairy farm in the Northeast Kingdom and I was educated entirely within the Vermont public school system. I learned how to read well by third grade, even though I struggled at first, thanks to many outstanding teachers, my family, and the larger systems established within the State of Vermont to support teachers. I then attended the University of Vermont and Saint Michael's College. I mention this because I think it is important to remember, in the midst of everyone's agreement, including mine, that we need to improve literacy outcomes for Vermont students, that many students proceed through Vermont school systems to become highly literate and well-educated. Both my personal background and the trajectory of my professional career, have contributed and supported my enthusiasm and interest in ensuring that all Vermont children learn to read not just because they have to, but because they want to read.

A commonly used metaphor for teaching reading that emerged from the National Reading Panel of the early 2000s is "Teaching Reading is Rocket Science". This metaphor is completely true for a variety of reasons. First, building a rocket is a scientifically complicated process and when you add an element like the space race or a political, human-created environment the process becomes complex. It's important to clearly understand the difference between complicated and complex. A complicated problem can be hard to solve but can be solved with rules, steps, or a logical sequence. Complex problems involve many unknowns, layers, and interrelated often external factors. Frequently the terms 'complicated' and 'complex' are used interchangeably, but the two terms are different.

This distinction applies to the situation we have now in our country with reading outcomes. Students are entering classrooms needing complicated instruction in learning how to read and many of these same students are living in a social atmosphere outside of school that no longer emphasizes or values literacy; this creates a complex problem.

To better understand, let's look at a common scenario VT teachers face on a daily basis. In this scenario, a student is assessed according to district guidelines and the results demonstrate the need for reading intervention. In discussion with the student's parent, it is mentioned that dyslexia runs in the family. In addition, the family lives in poverty and often this child demonstrates unregulated behavior, which keeps them from the majority of classroom instructional time. This is a complex yet common scenario.

Currently, in consideration by this committee are three bills that propose the solution to this child's problem is, systematic, evidence-based, structured literacy instruction. Sounds like it might work, but remember this one-size fits all "rule" is the fix for a complicated problem, not a complex one.

Many VT schools, including elementary schools within CVSD, already use systematic, evidence-based structured literacy programs. Specifically, we use a program called Foundations in every K-2 classroom and we

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have used this program since 2005. Yet, CVSD still has children that struggle to read. Therefore, this clearly demonstrates that a simple, one-size fits all rule, like the bills being proposed, will not resolve this complex issue. Rather, the solution needs to be multifaceted and include various elements that will address the larger systems at work in VT schools. The elements to the solution are educational leaders who have a deep knowledge base in regard to the science of reading, teacher professional development that is comprehensive and sustained, and structured literacy teaching materials that are engaging and motivating for students.

This year as the K-4 District Literacy Leader at CVSD I have been asked to work on two goals: increasing teacher expertise in the area of literacy and development of a CVSD Literacy Curriculum. One way that CVSD has decided to work on teacher expertise is with a program at the Stern Center called Lead to Read. Lead to Read includes several components. Teachers take a course via on-line modules called "Mindplay: A Comprehensive Reading Course for Educators" and as literacy coaches, we reinforce the on-line modules with 2-hour professional development sessions with teachers, at their local school, once a month. The other part of Lead to Read includes student assessment in the areas of phonemic awareness and spelling. Lead to Read, although it has been a positive and well-received learning journey for many within CVSD, has not "fixed" the equity or achievement gap that still exists in the data.

To illustrate, one teacher described the information presented in the on-line course as, "strong in the content and knowledge necessary for teachers to teach students in grades K-3 how to read." For example, some teachers have increased their knowledge about the structure of the English language. Teachers learned how to assess phonemic awareness and spelling. Teachers learned about the importance of spelling and phonics instruction and its impact upon the learning to read process. Yet, another teacher described, Lead to Read as "weak in application level to the classroom." Here's why. Teachers have classrooms filled with unique students with varied needs, varied home lives, and vastly different knowledge bases. Some students learn through whole group lessons, some won't sit for longer than 5 minutes, some students have little self-control and shout out every two minutes, and some students are quiet and shy and have a mother for a teacher who taught them to read before they entered kindergarten. A proficient classroom teacher needs to take all of these student needs and academic levels into account when designing lessons. It takes great skill, knowledge and time to read a teacher's manual which assumes all children are at one point in their learning and development and turn it into engaging content that EVERY student no matter their skill level or motivation level can access. A teacher needs to be knowledgeable about the content above and below the description written in the manual, creative with language to make the material engaging, flexible in the presentation of the concept so students can move and use their many senses, and organized in handling the many instructional materials students use during literacy learning. It takes collaboration, thought, conversations, and coaching to build this expertise within a teacher. This is the art of teaching that many educators reference.

Moreover, what we haven't seen, yet, is a change in teacher practice within the classroom as a result of Lead to Read. This is due to many factors, the first being, a lack of compelling evidence about the importance of structured language teaching for EVERY child regardless if they are a student who struggles or a student who excels. In addition, teachers have few, if any, instructional materials including books that are engaging and motivating for students to practice structured language skills. Quite simply there are very few classroom-based, backed by the science of reading, multi-level curriculum materials developed for school districts to rely upon. The majority of instructional materials written for structured language instruction are meant for one-on-one or small group use. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to adapt these individually designed teaching materials

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and make them motivating, fun, and worthwhile for the varied and unique learners a classroom teacher faces every day in the classroom. Lead to Read has been a strong beginning for us within CVSD and we all have benefited greatly, but this one collaboration and learning experience has not been enough to close the achievement gap. The answer to the equity gap is much more complex than either structured language teaching or professional development alone.

If we want the science of reading to take hold in VT classrooms, we need to use existing legislation and structures to improve early literacy instruction. Autonomy is a very basic premise of adult learning and professional growth. Legislating the type of reading instruction all K-3 teachers must use removes autonomy; therefore, many adults will explain it way, interpret the legislation in a varied format or reject it entirely. Please see the attached chart I included for more information about what works for adult learners.

Secondly, changing instruction is a little bit like trying to change habits in your own life. It takes many steps, lots of support, dedication and hard work. Teachers like the appeal of their current approach, which is called balanced literacy, because it supports them with engaging books, pre-planned lessons, and concrete strategies to use in their classrooms. Often the reading science community describes teachers as unprepared and ineffective. This criticism should be interpreted carefully because many reading science advocates commonly work individually with a student; whereas classroom teachers commonly work with 15-18 students of varied abilities and learning profiles. In other words, because a teaching approach works in a lab, it doesn't mean it will work in the classroom. As Margaret Goldberg (2019) states, "teachers won't embrace the research until it embraces them."

Thirdly, I concur with Meagan Roy that teachers, particularly those teaching in grades PreK -4, need to be experts in literacy instruction. And to be experts, teachers need **comprehensive** and **sustained** professional learning in phonemic awareness, phonics, handwriting, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, **and responsive teaching**. If you take a look at all of the literacy intervention programs recommended by any organization affiliated with readers who struggle, on both sides of the newly reinvigorated Reading Wars debate, long-term, rigorous professional learning requirements are a commonality of all successful reading intervention approaches. Increased knowledge and reflective practice as an educator build improvements in the instruction which impact student learning.

The Stern Center's slogan is correct, "because all great minds don't think alike." This statement implies that a one-size fits all structured language program doesn't work for everyone, it's clearly something else. That something else is called responsive teaching. It's the teacher's **response** to student answers and behaviors while they employ structured language teaching that cause the learning. This responsive teaching is the power behind the learning not the evidence-based structured literacy program that the teacher chose. It's much easier to do responsive teaching in a one-on-one setting than a classroom environment. A one-on-one setting is complicated; therefore, structured language teaching combined with responsive teaching makes a difference. In the complex classroom, the solution is different. The solution has to encompass the external factors brought into the classroom environment.

Building responsive teaching in the classroom requires a support system, someone who can do the difficult work alongside teachers without judgment. This person is a coach. Within VT, we have a fragile and varied system of coaching. We need to strengthen and build coaching structures and systems to create a culture of coaching related to early literacy instruction. Without coaches working alongside teachers to support their learning within the complex school systems that exist within our state, professional learning can't and

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won't be comprehensive or sustained. Let's use existing legislation to improve our Multi-tiered system of supports in ALL VT school districts. In addition, the VT Agency of Education has a history of worthwhile, rigorous professional development for teachers if we look back to the days of the VT DRA in the late '90s and early 2000s. I suggest that we refocus the Agency of Education back to rigorous, teacher-centered professional development in early literacy. This refocusing effort will send the message to teachers that our state values both reading science and teacher voice.

In closing, solving this complex problem requires a multipart solution. Although the science of reading and structured literacy both have value they are merely the seat on a three-legged stool. To support the seat, we need an equal focus on three legs or elements: educating leaders, educating and then supporting teachers and improving instructional materials.

Children and teachers need to hear the beauty of words, they need to listen for the rhythm of language, and experience the powerful effects that books can have upon lives to be motivated to understand the structure of the English Language. Teachers within the State of VT know how to build joy around books; let's use that strength combined with existing legislation and agencies to support teachers as they learn how to place equal importance on both joy and structured language instruction.

Thank you again for listening and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

# Staff Development Adult Characteristics

**Prerequisites:**

Need for a staff development plan for a local site

**Purpose:**

To support the development of a local staff in-service plan

**Information:**

Are you interested in what the experts have to say about the adult learner?

Mostly, they are very divided. Much of the controversy seems to be about the definition of "adult learner." A widely accepted definition comes from Arthur Chickering, from the National Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner, which defines "Adult Learner" as an individual whose major role in life is something other than full-time student.

Here are some general characteristics of adult learners as compared to children:

CHILDHOOD	ADULTHOOD
Children depend upon adults for material support, psychological support, and life management. They are other-directed.	Adults depend upon themselves for material support and life management. Although they must still meet many psychological needs through others, they are largely self-directed.
Children perceive one of their major roles in life to be that of learner.	Adults perceive themselves to be doers; using previous learning to achieve success as workers, parents, etc.
Children, to a large degree, learn what they are told to learn.	Adults learn best when they perceive the outcomes of the learning process as valuable--contributing to their own development, work success, etc.
Children view the established learning content as important because adults tell them it is important.	Adults often have very different ideas about what is important to learn.
Children, as a group within educational settings, are much alike. They're approximately the same age, come from	Adults are very different from each other. Adult learning groups are likely to be composed of persons of many different ages, backgrounds, education levels, etc.

similar socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.	
Children actually perceive time differently than older people do. Our perception of time changes as we age--time seems to pass more quickly as we get older.	Adults, in addition to perceiving time itself differently than children do, also are more concerned about the effective use of time.
Children have a limited experience base.	Adults have a broad, rich experience base to which to relate new learning.
Children generally learn quickly.	Adults, for the most part, learn more slowly than children, but they learn just as well.
Children are open to new information and will readily adjust their views.	Adults are much more likely to reject or explain away new information that contradicts their beliefs.
Children's readiness to learn is linked to both academic development and biological development.	Adults' readiness to learn is more directly linked to need--needs related to fulfilling their roles as workers, spouses, parents, etc. and coping with life changes (divorce, death of a loved one, retirement, etc.).
Children learn (at least in part) because learning will be of use in the future.	Adults are more concerned about the immediate applicability of learning.
Children are often externally motivated (by the promise of good grades, praise from teachers and parents, etc.)	Adults are more often internally motivated (by the potential for feelings of worth, self-esteem, achievement, etc.)
Children have less well-formed sets of expectations in terms of formal learning experiences. Their "filter" of past experience is smaller than that of adults.	Adults have well-formed expectations, which, unfortunately, are sometimes negative because they are based upon unpleasant past formal learning experiences.

The above list comes from "Plan instruction for adults, Module N-4," The National Center for Research in Vocational Education. (1987) Ohio State University, Columbus, OH



Launching young readers!

# Reading Rockets

Blogs About Reading

Right to Read



Margaret Goldberg

Margaret Goldberg is the co-founder of Right to Read Project, a group of teachers, researchers, and activists committed to the pursuit of equity through literacy. Margaret serves as a literacy coach in a large urban district in California and was formerly a classroom teacher and curriculum developer. All posts are reprinted with permission from the [Right to Read Project](#). Follow the Right to Read Project on [Twitter](#).

## Teachers Won't Embrace Research Until It Embraces Them

July 19, 2019

I understand why advocates, researchers, and policymakers who feel the urgency of our literacy crisis are frustrated when teachers don't embrace reading science. But my entry into the world of reading research was difficult, and while I take pride in my determination to learn, I understand why other teachers might be deterred. If we want teachers to apply research, it may be helpful to think about why they aren't. I'll open my own experience up as an example.

	<b>In the Balanced Literacy Community I felt that...</b>	<b>In the Reading Science Community I found that...</b>
<b>Hierarchy of Expertise</b>	I was an expert because I was told, "You know your students best."	Teachers were described as "unprepared" and "ineffective."
<b>Understanding Reading</b>	Reading was described in terms that matched my own memory of learning to read: "natural" and "magical."	Reading was a complex neurological process that I didn't understand and phrases like "curriculum casualties" and "reading failure" terrified me.
<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	My role was simple and pleasurable because I believed students learned to read by reading. I matched students with books while observing and encouraging their progress.	I'd be to blame if any of my students did not become skilled readers.
<b>Professional Reading</b>	I was a good reader. Books and articles were enjoyable, easy to read, and often included anecdotes to which I could relate.	Articles included words I'd never encountered before ( <i>saccade</i> ), concepts I didn't understand ( <i>effect size</i> ), graphs I couldn't read, and references to studies I didn't know.
<b>Trainings</b>	I was welcomed and spoken to with respect, if not with admiration, by the presenters. They understood my job.	At conferences, I was not the intended audience and comments about teachers not only made me feel unwelcome, but discouraged me from inviting my colleagues.
	I left with concrete strategies to try with my students the next day.	I left rethinking important ideas, but without knowing how to apply what I had learned.
<b>Community and Relationships</b>	I was aligned with my colleagues, my supervisors, the people who trained me, and the educators I knew to admire.	I became an outsider in my district and until I connected with others, I felt alone.

We need more teachers connected to the research community. Without teachers asking teacher-y questions — “*What does this mean for my instruction?*” “*How do you do that with 25 wiggly five year olds?*” “*What should I have the other kids do while I \_\_\_ with a small group of students?*” — research does not make its way into classrooms.

It is not a lack of teacher willingness to change that has stalled instruction in the dark ages; there is no one who feels the urgency of applying new learning to instruction the way a teacher does when she’s sitting in a training, knowing she’ll face her students the next day.

Classroom teachers are the most direct and efficient conduit to students, so if we care about student learning, we need to care about teachers *and their feelings*, even if it means rethinking the tone, accessibility, and framing of research.

When I felt overwhelmed by new learning, a few mentors helped me regain my balance and encouraged me to continue learning and teaching.

They said:

- That’s not a stupid question. Let’s think about that together.
- I think you might find that [book/article/webinar] has some of the answers you’re looking for.
- To apply this in your classroom, you might try...
- If you’re looking for research on [sight words] you might need the term [orthographic mapping].
- I know this might mean changes in the way you teach and even the way you think about [reading comprehension] and I’m happy to help you work through the implications.

The care they took in speaking *to* me rather than *about* “teachers” meant the difference for me between feeling shut down and feeling inspired. And my students reaped the rewards of my learning.

We would all benefit from researchers and specialists seeking out connections with teachers — research would improve, as would instruction — and the combined strengths of both communities would benefit students.

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## TAGS:

"What an astonishing thing a book is. It's a flat object made from a tree with flexible parts on which are imprinted lots of funny dark squiggles. But one glance at it and you're inside the mind of another person ..." —

Carl Sagan