

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Kelly Bouteiller, Literacy Coordinator and Instructional Coach, Charlotte Central School, Charlotte, Vermont

TOPIC: Literacy Instruction in Vermont

DATE: January 24, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am currently the K-8 Literacy Coordinator and Instructional coach at Charlotte Central School. I've been an educator in Vermont since 2007, when I graduated from Saint Michael's College as an Elementary Education major. In 2018 I achieved National Board Certification as an early childhood generalist. I have spent the majority of my career as a classroom teacher, most recently teaching first and second grade. I'm grateful to be able to share my perspective as a teacher leader, but perhaps more importantly, as an experienced early elementary classroom teacher, and finally as a mom of a child who will soon be a Vermont Kindergartener.

The Vermont public schools I have taught in are built around a culture of continuous learning for teachers. In CVSD where I currently work, there is a great deal of emphasis and resources directed to increasing teacher expertise. It is also in our practice to make data informed decisions at all levels of our system. To this end, all K-4 teachers of literacy in my school are taking the Mindplay Online Course, part of the Lead to Read Initiative offered through the Stern Center. Part of my job is to facilitate follow up professional learning. Since all teachers go through the modules at their own pace and have varying degrees of background knowledge, coming together to make sense of the information and start to define how it will inform our common practices is key.

A lot of what I've learned from the Lead to Read course has been a review of information I encountered briefly in my undergraduate education and more explicitly in graduate courses along the way. This is also the case for my colleagues who are classroom teachers. This valuable tool for increasing teacher knowledge is NOT a curriculum. It does not dictate how to teach, but it has allowed some common ground to talk about what we know about how students learn to read. As a result, our practices are starting to shift. For example, we've always assessed phonological awareness for Kindergarteners as part of our comprehensive assessment system. Phonological awareness is a prerequisite skill for reading. This fall, we looked more broadly at phonological awareness, and specifically phonemic awareness. We sought to find out whether our students could accurately hear the sounds in a word and efficiently manipulate the sounds in the word. We've used this data to reflect on our practices and have started to make shifts in both classroom instruction and intervention. Our work with Lead to Read has supported and enhanced our practices given us opportunity to reflect and collaborate, including reaffirming the many effective and engaging practices already in place in our classrooms.

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What's been most impactful is **my own work** digging into the science of reading. The most current information from cognitive science about how students learn to read **is compelling**. It **has** reinforced the critical need for early educators to have a comprehensive understanding of the English language so that our teaching can be explicit and systematic. I absolutely think teachers deserve to know and understand this research, and I hope for more collaboration between schools of education and schools of neuroscience, so that preservice teachers have the fullest possible picture of how to effectively teach foundational literacy skills to young children.

Is this conversation important? Yes, so very very important. Is legislating our approach to early reading instruction the path to better outcomes for Vermont students? I'm not so sure. Teaching can and should be evidence-based, but teaching is not a science, it is a craft. We can know the science, and systematic instruction can be one of our tools, but *our* constituents are groups of children. Each child is unique. We make minute by minute decisions based on the data we collect about what they know and don't know, but also based on what their body language is telling us about how they are feeling, about whether or not they came to school hungry, about whether the book suggested by a curriculum is of any interest to them. We already use systematic, evidence-based practices in our classrooms. The language in the proposed bills may prompt schools to focus too narrowly on programs offering only structured language instruction, disproportionately focusing time and monetary resources away from practices that support educating the whole child.

I know you are here because you care about whether students in our schools are learning to read. I do too. This is what I think about all day, everyday. It's also what I think about when I get home at night. As I mentioned at the start, I'm also a mom. My oldest son, Holden, is four years old and in the fall of 2021, he will be a Kindergartener. As a teacher and a mom, the proposed legislation doesn't concern me because of what it explicitly states, but rather it gives me pause because of what it doesn't and *can't* explicitly state. Growing a reader is so much more than phonics instruction. It's vocabulary, and comprehension, and it's **engagement**. Do I want Holden to benefit from a teacher who can deliver systematic, evidence based instruction in phonics? Absolutely. Do I want that that instruction to be prioritized over a teacher who uses their expertise to know that Holden really worries about making mistakes and might feign disinterest before taking a public risk? Do I want his teacher to be so focused on one approach that's mandated, that she doesn't have the time to build his phonemic awareness by including shared poetry and songs in their day? Do I want that teachers' focus so firmly directed toward brain research, that she misses the all evidence that each interaction with Holden provides her to be a responsive teacher? Absolutely not.

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I hope I have adequately communicated that I am firmly in the camp that knows that the science of reading should inform our practice, and that we owe it to all children to deliver systematic, evidence-based instruction. But I am also firmly in the camp that believes none of this matters if you don't foster motivation and engagement. Without connection and relationships, and deep, deep knowledge of the students in front of you, curricula and discrete pedagogical moves don't mean much. I believe when we hold one piece of this equation in higher regard by going so far as to legislate an approach to a singular component of teaching students to read, we risk oversimplifying the complexity of learning to read, and devaluing the art of being a teacher.

I am really proud to be an educator in the state of Vermont, where the education and well being of our youngest residents is a firmly held value. Please continue to advocate for the children in our state by supporting the sustainability of effective systems as indicated by previously established and appropriately broad legislation. Please keep working to ensure that before kids even come to kindergarten they have equitable access to rich experiences, guided by competent educators who are fairly compensated for their hard work. In your work to support our kids, consider stepping back from the type of narrow legislation that may unintentionally shift our focus away from the complex work of raising literate, engaged, well-rounded children who are the future of our communities. Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.