

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

5 High School Drive, Unit #1, Montpelier, VT 05602

Office: 802-223-9796

Fax: 802-223-9795

www.mrpsvt.org



Our schools are caring, creative, and equitable communities that empower all children to build on their talents and passions to grow into engaged citizens and life-long learners.

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you on a subject that is very near and dear to my heart. A little on my background--as a teacher I held a dual license in New York in special and general education. In addition to my masters degree in educational leadership, I have a masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Learning Disabilities. I was a self-contained special educator in Baton Rouge, LA and team teaching special educator in Brooklyn, NY. Both positions were in very impoverished areas with a lot of reading difficulties. In Brooklyn, I was also a first and second grade teacher as well as a literacy coach. I was again a first and second grade teacher in Vienna, Austria where my classes had 15 nationalities and 12 languages. I was charged with teaching every child in both of these environments to read, in English, on grade level and I have the evidence to show that I did just that with every child. As a classroom teacher and special educator, I dedicated nearly the entirety of my professional learning, personal reflection, and pedagogical practice to literacy instruction.

Currently I am the superintendent of schools for Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools. I've had several "lives" in my career as an educator, a literacy expert is one of those lives that I draw on often and remain passionate about. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you on this topic.

There are several ideas that I support in the proposed legislation.

1. I applaud this committee for putting a focus on literacy instruction. To my knowledge we have not done that collectively as a state.
2. I'd like to highlight the section of Representative Cupoli's bill that has a requirement for the school board to formally review and publish an annual monitoring report on student literacy outcomes. Accountability is not always a bad word and this alone elevates what I believe to be the vision behind this proposed legislations--getting all kids to read on grade level by the end of grade 3.
3. I recognize and agree with the DMG report that many of our teachers in Vermont do not know how to break the process of reading down for learners who struggle with reading. This is both a content knowledge gap as well as a data literacy gap. In addition many well-meaning interventionists and special educators are not where we need them to be in regards to remediating reading difficulties. There is most definitely professional learning needs in these areas.

4. Common Core Standards specifically targets skills for each grade level in [foundational skills](#).
 - a. Formalized curriculum in schools needs to show that such foundational skills have been prioritized and it often is not.

I also, however, would like to pose several concerns regarding the proposed language.

1. Discussion concerning Teacher Prep Programs (all 3 bills) and mandatory “awareness training” (Rep. Leffler’s bill) for all initial and renewal of licensure--Research dating back to 1988 (Joyce) on teacher learning:

Component of Training	Awareness + Concept Understanding	Skill Attainment	Application & Problem Solving
Presentation of Theory	85%	15%	5-10%
Modeling	85%	18%	5-10%
Practice & Low Risk Feedback	85%	80%	10-15%
Coaching, Peer visits	90%	90%	80-90%

- a. A mandatory, one time workshop would be of considerable costs to districts or teachers, a resource pull on the Agency of Education that currently has no capacity to pull something of this magnitude off, and would have little to no effect on teacher practice.
 - i. High cost, low impact is not a driver that promotes change
 - b. Teacher prep programs live in theory and modeling. The practice student teachers receive is too limited to be considered even practice/low risk feedback.
 - i. the place for real change happens in the field, not in teacher prep programs
 - c. Each bill’s language discusses the evaluation of Teacher Preparation Programs. How would this occur? Teachers come from all 50 states and several now come from non-traditional routes to teaching that do not include a prep program.
 - i. The Agency of Education has no current capacity to get this done in either regard-evaluate teacher prep programs or hold mandatory “awareness workshops.”
2. How these bills define “evidence-based structured literacy instruction” quite honestly scares me.

- a. Richard Allington, 2001 *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*, Addison-Wesley Educational Publishing, “Truth be told, it is impossible to locate 100 studies showing the same effect for any method, material, or program (p. 9).” “‘What research says...’ is currently an almost meaningless phrase” when talking about reading instruction (p.11). The only thing that research agrees on is that children are different and learn in different ways.
 - b. Multi-sensory is the term used in each of these bills.
 - i. Multi-sensory Instruction (eg. Orton Gillingham) is a type of instruction that is used for a very small percentage of students with significant challenges in reading. It is not best practice for all students.
 1. Venture to bet that all people in chamber learned to read and very few, if any, learned through a multi-sensory approach
 - a. As a former first and second grade teacher, I taught hundreds of kids how to read on grade level and did not once use a strict multi-sensory approach.
 - b. Multi-sensory is a time intensive pedagogical approach, best suited for a one to one teacher/student ratio. It is completely impractical as a teaching strategy in a classroom of 15-20 students.
 - c. A multi-sensory approach could, in fact, make reading progress slower for the vast majority of our learners because it does not involve actual book in hand or comprehension. Mandating this approach for all learners could have disastrous effects on our young readers.
3. What’s missing from all three bills?
 - a. Comprehension
 - i. Students are not reading if they are not comprehending. Phonics and phonemic awareness is most definitely one of the cueing systems readers use to make meaning, but it is not the only cueing system. By defining “evidence-based literacy instruction” as “targeted phonological awareness, sound-symbol association, syllable structure, morphology, syntax, and semantics” there is a strong chance that teachers and administrators will define reading as just that.
 - ii. Comprehension is what plays a larger role in other content areas. One cannot solve mathematical or scientific problems without comprehending what the problem is asking.
 - iii. Elizabeth Sulzby’s groundbreaking work in emergent reading for preK and kinder students is based on the concept of story structure and language - in other words comprehension. This work is just as influential on the development of reading as phonemic awareness work.

- b. Definition of Reading by Kathy Collins and Matt Glover (*I Am Reading: Nurturing Young Children's Meaning Making and Joyful Engagement with Any Book*, 2015, Heineman) "Robust and well-rounded reading is the interplay among the abilities to decode print, read it with fluency, and make meaning of it all. Reading is the elegant orchestration of macro and micro skills and strategies. The act of reading is swaddled in purpose, schema, response, and so many other things (p. 4)."
 - i. A narrow definition and pedagogical approach, such as suggested in these bills, narrows a child's sense of what reading is and could be.
 - ii. (Rep. Webb's bill) While word study may work as "beginning with the student's easiest and most basic elements and progressing methodically to more difficult material, as indicated by systematic progress monitoring. Each step is built on those steps previously learned..." reading is too complex to break it down this simply. It's why some 4 year olds can read and comprehend every dinosaur book put in front of them. Their schema (a comprehension skill) enables the reading of significantly complex texts. However, an equally complex text in fiction or on a different topic would stump them.
 - c. Our goal as an educational system is to create life-long readers. We have to give equal weight to comprehension from the start; students have to love books and if we are only teaching them to read in pieces or the micro skills, there is significant potential to put that love in jeopardy as well as developing students who have no sense of what they are actually reading.
 - d. These bills are entitled "Literacy" with no mention of writing. If it is reading that is the concern, call it that; however define it correctly.
4. Screening for Dyslexia
- a. Dyslexia falls under the category of specific learning disabilities that is covered by IDEA and the Vermont Special Education Rules and Regulations. Not every child who struggles with reading has dyslexia. Those that do are identified as having a specific learning disability. This is already federal law.
 - i. Why just dyslexia? What about students who struggle with fluency? What about students who can decode anything, but comprehend nothing? What about dysgraphia?
 - ii. Screening all students would be logistically impossible, a significant financial burden in terms of additional human resources or outsourcing, and is completely unnecessary.
 - 1. Screening for specific learning disabilities in reading involves administering multiple standardized tests administered by a Special Educator or School Psychologist. It is incredibly time consuming. Many schools do not have the staff needed to pull this off outside of a formal special education evaluation.
 - a. Again, high cost, low impact
 - b. Significant potential to lead to overdiagnosis
 - i. Vast research showing that once a student is

identified with a special need, they fall further and further behind their peers.

2. If schools receive Title I funding they are required by federal law to already have a process for identifying struggling readers.
 3. Instructional decisions for students who have been labeled with a specific learning disability are made by the IEP team. I wonder how the language in the two bills focusing specifically on dyslexia would interact with current special education law. IEP teams need to make decisions for a child based on their unique circumstances. Each child's learning profile is and will be different. A mandated approach imposed by the VT Legislature would be in conflict with this federal requirement.
 - iii. Screeners for reading challenges already exist and schools have to screen within their Local Assessment Plan.
5. Agency of Education oversight
- a. To my knowledge, there is no "reading department" at the AOE.
 - b. How will the resource poor AOE evaluate effective literacy instruction for all K-3 students across the state? This is an impossible task for 12/1/2020

I'm happy to take any questions you may have.