

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Chair, Census-Based Funding Advisory Group; CVSD Director of Student Support Services)

TOPIC: Literacy Instruction in Vermont

DATE: January 24, 2020

The need for the Vermont education system to focus on improving literacy outcomes for Vermont children is undisputed. Like many in the field, I have a sense of urgency to improve our practices and ensure that all Vermont learners are able to read. You've had (or will have) the opportunity to hear from a number of experts about literacy, literacy instruction and what we need to do to address the fact that by some measures fewer than half of Vermont learners read at grade level. Today I intend to share my thoughts from two perspectives: as the Chair of the Census-Based Funding Advisory Group and as a district administrator.

Act 173 of 2018

The purpose of Act 173 is to “[enhance] the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services provided to students who require additional support.” Although known in some circles as the “special education funding law,” most familiar with the law recognize it as landmark legislation designed to improve the systems of support (and therefore outcomes) of struggling students in Vermont. It requires that schools implement a multi-tiered system of supports in order to implement the recommendations of the District Management Group’s 2016 study - including their pivotal recommendation to improve early literacy practices in Vermont classrooms.

As the Chair of the Act 173 Advisory Group, I’ve had the opportunity to engage with stakeholders about what supports Vermont districts need in order to effectively implement the law. The Advisory Group has given significant input to the Agency regarding the need for high quality, long term and individualized professional development in order to implement the instructional components of 173. It has strongly urged the Agency to develop a comprehensive plan that:

- Is coordinated, well designed and consistent
- Includes a targeted approach to professional learning resources that will prioritize support to districts most in need of support based on identified metrics
- Includes financial support of existing Agency grants to support implementation.

The reason why I raise this point is that districts are already going to be engaged deeply with shifting their systems of support to address literacy for struggling learners - which is exactly what I believe you hope to achieve in your discussions about additional legislation. I firmly believe that the systemic approach required in 173 is necessary and required to be able to make the gains you are seeking in the area of literacy - and if districts focus narrowly on one element of content instead of this broader system, they will not have the far reaching impact on student outcomes.

MTSS implementation:

Act 173 requires that all school districts “...develop and maintain a tiered system of academic and behavioral supports for the purpose of providing all students with the opportunity to succeed or to be challenged in the general education environment.” Effective MTSS implementation focuses on five essential components: a systemic and comprehensive approach; high quality instruction and intervention; comprehensive assessment; effective collaboration; and expertise. These components are required in order to make significant change in schools regardless of the content area a student is struggling with.

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Chair, Census-Based Funding Advisory Group; CVSD Director of Student Support Services)

TOPIC: Literacy Instruction in Vermont

DATE: January 24, 2020

The legislation being proposed focuses on two important elements of an MTSS: expertise (the professional learning) and comprehensive assessment (screening). In other words, the work of improving literacy outcomes for Vermont learners is already situated in existing legislation - landmark legislation that will require the singular focus of districts for the foreseeable future. The work you are hoping districts to focus on is captured here.

Administrative Perspective

My second purpose in being here is to share what I'd want the general assembly to understand from the perspective of a district administrator. When it comes to expertise about the research, I trust that your committee has heard from a number of experts who bring particular research perspectives to their work. As an administrator, I am more interested in taking action that will move my system forward, and ensure that unintended consequences of well intentioned legislation doesn't get in the way of moving forward. I'm here to share with you what I believe schools need in order to get better at teaching all kids to read. I'll also share some worries I have, and where I would suggest caution.

What Educators Need

Simply put, Vermont educators need to be expert teachers of literacy. In order to get there, we need deep, comprehensive and sustained professional learning in all components of good literacy instruction. This includes foundational skills instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, handwriting - especially for early grades), reading comprehension, reading fluency (early grades), writing instruction in various text types & genres, grammar, and vocabulary. Schools are going to need access to professional learning opportunities that are sustained (and the funding to support it). And schools are going to need coaching. We know that good professional learning doesn't happen in a single workshop.

In addition to this deep professional learning in literacy, districts will simultaneously need the same deep, sustained professional learning and coaching as they implement their overall MTSS. As lawmakers, it's important that you understand this intersection as you consider legislation. Simply requiring schools to increase their professional development in literacy is not going to be enough.

What to be Cautious About

There are a number of unintended consequences for legislators to consider. First, I would be cautious of what might sound like the "magic bullet" of structured literacy instruction. Narrow legislation also narrows the focus in schools, artificially creating a situation where the school believes they've found the one thing to make change. It's not that there's anything wrong with identifying a focus on something specific like structured reading instruction. The danger comes when schools shift their focus away from everything else to dive in on what is only one part of the picture, at the expense of the real systems change that is required to make this work. The truth is that there is no magic bullet when it comes to reading. Focusing on professional learning is essential - but it's only one small part of what schools will need to do in order to improve outcomes. Expertise in one aspect of teaching literacy by itself won't be enough.

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Chair, Census-Based Funding Advisory Group; CVSD Director of Student Support Services)

TOPIC: Literacy Instruction in Vermont

DATE: January 24, 2020

Specific to the discussions you may have about screening for specific disabilities: I would encourage caution about this as well, for several reasons:

First, we know we have a problem in Vermont with literacy instruction. Our *overall* literacy rates are far lower than is acceptable. We have an overall instruction problem. Implementing a very narrow screening tool to target a specific way that students struggle is likely to result in a large number of false positives - students who don't actually have an organic reading disability, but are struggling because they haven't received good instruction. There are some who would say it doesn't matter why they were identified - it's important for them to receive intervention. But if we focus our work solely on our intervention systems (by screening and identifying large numbers of students in need of intervention), we will again lose sight of gaps in our first instruction ability. Strengthening classroom instruction is the single most important thing we can do to improve literacy outcomes for all students. Better instruction will mean fewer students in need of intervention, allowing schools to focus their most expert interventionists on a smaller number of students who truly need individualized support.

Second, we know that creating labels doesn't result in changes to instruction. "Although labels may be useful in some situations (e.g., to qualify a student for additional support), they have not proven helpful in identifying specific learning strengths and needs, nor do they typically indicate exactly what types of support and instruction will lead to successful reading. That information is critical because research shows that reading difficulties can be addressed or even prevented with appropriate instruction and intervention. Reading difficulties are not inevitable, permanent, or, as some have claimed, "incurable." (ILA, 2019)

Third: Vermont already has legislation that requires us to screen and identify, as early as possible, students in need of additional support. Act 173's MTSS obligation includes screening *as part of* a comprehensive assessment system that also requires schools to identify where students are compared to where we'd expect them to be, dives deeper for students so that professionals can target instruction, monitors student progress to determine whether or not instruction/intervention is working...etc. A comprehensive assessment system itself will screen and identify students in need of support. When "...high-quality data are reviewed on a fixed schedule, they may serve the purpose of screening in the absence of a designated tool" (VTmtss Field Guide, 2019). If schools are required to have a separate dyslexia screener, they may believe (falsely) that this suffices for a balanced and comprehensive assessment system. They'll be left with little information about how to intervene with the student, and their system may not have the capacity to provide that intervention and respond appropriately.

Existing Legislation

The Census-Based Funding Advisory Group describes Act 173 as landmark education legislation, requiring unwavering focus and attention on the part of schools for the foreseeable future. Literacy is already specified in that legislation. MTSS is already specified in that legislation, which also includes the requirement that schools have assessment systems that provide screening for learners who struggle (including those who may meet criteria for dyslexia). It's already there, and schools will already be stretched as they implement. The risk of

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Chair, Census-Based Funding Advisory Group; CVSD Director of Student Support Services)

TOPIC: Literacy Instruction in Vermont

DATE: January 24, 2020

additional legislation is that it will cause schools to shift their focus away from the bigger system implications of 173, which are directly related to what needs to be in place in schools in order to move the needle.

In conclusion:

It may seem logical to put forth legislation, and some may question why anyone would have reservations. In fact, I've heard researchers ask that "why not?" question during a conversation with a group of stakeholders. But the answer to "why not" is that well intentioned legislation could have sweeping unintended consequences, leading to a situation where the problem gets worse, not better.