



I'm so glad to be here with you today to discuss Early Literacy in Vermont Public Schools. Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Susan Koch. I have taught kindergarten, first or second grade since 1988. All but two years of my teaching career have been in Vermont. My background includes training as a Reading Recovery Teacher, professional development at Teacher's College in New York City (where my grandmother got her teaching degree) a Field Based Master's Degree of Education from Southern New Hampshire University, and a plethora of early literacy workshops and courses. In 2016, I was awarded the Vermont State Teacher of the Year, and convened with teachers from 58 states and territories. In my year of service, I was able to proudly represent our state in a variety of settings, and was always happy to return to a community which ensured high quality standards for all learners. I come from a family of educators and readers. I feel passionate about reading, and early literacy.

I have had a chance to look at the three proposed bills, and wanted to offer some viewpoints that I share with colleagues. We are proud of the work we have accomplished in early literacy, and want to provide a glimpse into our first grade world.

I want to paint a picture of a classroom in Vermont filled with six and seven-year olds at all different stages in their journey to become fluent readers and writers.

Many of you have had experiences with early readers, and may remember that moment when it all came together for the reader. The reader decoded words, assigned meaning to those words, and was able to comprehend, or understand, what was read. That moment was just one in the continuum of literacy learning for that reader. As a first-grade teacher I get to witness these learning moments daily. I have the privilege of guiding young learners to this point.

The Vermont Education Quality Standards (EQS) require districts to provide comprehensive assessment systems. Districts in Vermont have done a fine job of developing assessments, and devoting time to understand and utilize these assessments to guide instruction. We use a variety of methods to understand growth for each learner. In order to get a clear picture of learning, we use multiple sources of information, including formative and summative assessments.

For example, in my home district, Renaissance STAR Reading Assessments are used 3 times a year for each learner. Additionally, each learner has a Fountas and Pinnell benchmark reading assessment administered 3 times a year. First graders who have lagging phonemic awareness are offered the PASS assessment. All learners also complete the Developmental Spelling Analysis, the 100 word reading list, and the Word Analysis assessment 3 times a year.

As you can imagine, it is quite a task to administer all of these assessments, while continuing to provide a literacy rich daily learning experience, conduct guided reading groups, offer phonics lessons, and daily reading workshop and writing workshop. Several years ago, I was in the evaluation cycle, and my principal came to observe my classroom during our literacy block. This administrator proclaimed, "This is like an orchestra- fitting together all of the components, and ensuring that all needs are met." During his one hour visit, my principal saw a mini lesson on a word attack strategy, a guided reading group, a read aloud with comprehension questions, and another guided reading group. Students were reading leveled books, using iPads for reading practice, or completing a word sort with digraphs.

This science of rich literacy instruction does not happen by accident, and is not to be underestimated. Without all of the pillars of a rich, vibrant, engaging, balanced literacy program, we will not develop fluent readers. With a systematic approach encouraging "phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension we can. I encourage you to investigate the reading instruction that is happening in our schools. You may find that these components are in place. You may find many educators trained in a multi-sensory approach (eg Orton Gillingham). You may find practitioners (like me) who offer a balanced literacy approach. You may find fine tuned orchestras that enable learners to progress on the learning continuum for early literacy.

It disturbs me to consider the idea that the Vermont legislature would become involved in requiring a specific "evidence based structured literacy instruction". This proposed legislation feels inappropriate and quite frankly, feels demeaning. You clearly want what is best for kids, yet intention and impact are two different things. I cannot imagine the legislature stepping into any other regulated profession and requiring a specific approach. Would the legislature direct a medical doctor in her decisions to approach a to surgery? It just doesn't make sense to dictate a phonics approach to reading instruction when all research indicates that readers need to use visual cues, syntax, and creating meaning as they read. This synthesis enables readers to have success and apply what is read. It is an oversimplification to assume that all learners would benefit from only phonics based approach.

Another area of concern is the proposal to screen all students for dyslexia. Not all students would benefit from this screening. Students struggling in reading and writing may have comprehension issues,

fluency issues, or language delays. Those struggling with reading may or may not have dyslexia or dysgraphia. If a learner does have a specific learning disability, IDEA and Vermont Special Education Rules and Regulations determine that a specific learning disability is identified and an Individualized Education Plan is developed. I do support early identification of learners with lagging skills, and progress monitoring, and supports for those learners. Literacy assessments provide information which offers insights into the learner. School teams may use this information to determine which supports to provide through the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. Additional assessments can always be used to determine further needs, or evaluations.

Parents and educators alike become concerned when readers struggle. It can be challenging to determine the cause of the difficulty, our source of the problem. Providing embedded ongoing professional development for educators in the area of balanced literacy would have a deep impact. I recommend funding for this support for educators. Many schools across our state have been unable to invest in quality materials for Tier One instruction (General Education). A dedicated plan for improving and updating materials and training for educators would have a great impact. This focus would be beneficial to the children in our state, especially those who are struggling with reading and writing.

You are welcome to visit my classroom website here: <https://susankoch11.wixsite.com/2018>