

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

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The need for the Vermont education system to focus on improving literacy outcomes for Vermont children is undisputed. We applaud the Committee's recognition of this as an urgent priority and the recognition that in order to move forward with the implementation of the recommendations from the District Management Group (DMG) and Act 173, supervisory unions and schools will need to invest significant time, effort, and financial resources. Furthermore, we support the focus on systems-driven, sustainable literacy instruction and intervention for all students with measurable outcomes and agree that lasting change and impact will only occur through this lens.

As district-level administrators, we are very mindful of taking action that will move our system and schools forward and ensuring that unintended consequences of well-intentioned legislation doesn't get in the way of moving forward. We are here to share with you the journey started in 2014 in what was the Orange North Supervisory Union and continues in the present Central VT Supervisory Union. We are proud of our efforts and believe that the lessons learned, and the outcomes achieved are applicable across Vermont.

There are several components that we believe are critical and non-negotiable. First and foremost, MTSS is the framework for all change and initiatives. This requires a strong vision and support from supervisory union and building-based leadership. We emphasize data-based decision making in a collaborative model. We also believe in the investment in teachers rather than programs. Simply put, Vermont teachers need to be experts in teaching literacy. This is not achieved through the purchase of "canned curriculum"; rather it involves significant and on-going training, coaching, and supervision.

In order to move forward in improving literacy outcomes we prioritized the need for strengthening universal instruction and recognized that as the single most important thing we can do to improve literacy outcomes for all students. Better instruction means 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. It was critical that we move away from a "silo" system between general and special education that encourages a "wait to fail" model and towards a comprehensive MTSS that provides intervention delivered by highly skilled teachers as soon as students start to struggle.

We employ a content-specialty model starting in grade 1 and focus teacher professional development in their content area. All teachers – general educators, special educators, and SLPs – are trained to be interventionists as well. We have a comprehensive assessment system with continuous progress monitoring where teams of administrators and teachers engage in data-analysis to monitor student growth and fidelity and effectiveness of universal instruction and intervention.

What to be Cautious About

Significant systems-change will be required to move schools forward in their ability to meet the literacy needs of all students. The financial support proposed by this bill, while welcome and appreciated, will only be secured by a select few supervisory unions and may be unlikely to provide the necessary funds to support the efforts that are required. We also caution against legislation that 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.