

## Testimony on H.101 - Literacy Support

**Testimony To:** House Committee on Education

**Respectfully Submitted By:** Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education

**Date:** February 3, 2021

I support the findings and conclusions of H.101. Vermont needs to have a focus on improving literacy outcomes for all students for several reasons:

- 1) Literacy plays a critical and foundational role in the larger education process – to address our persistent issues of equity, Vermont needs to have a focused strategy on literacy;
- 2) In the context of a knowledge-based economy and rapidly evolving communications systems and networks, literacy is increasingly viewed as a civil rights issue – citizens who do not have strong literacy skills can be marginalized, and denied opportunity for full civic participation and economic opportunity;
- 3) Vermont’s literacy data in the early grades points to the need for improvement (see below);
- 4) Vermont has embarked on significant education reform in special education under Act 173. The findings of the DMG report that informed the development of Act 173 point to the need for Vermont to cultivate stronger school district systems – literacy reform provides an opportunity to organize the practical work of systems improvement since it involves the essential school district organizational systems of curriculum, assessment, student support systems, and professional development;
- 5) As we begin the recovery work in education as a result of the COVID-19 emergency, having a focus on literacy will be helpful in guiding the work of districts towards prioritizing interventions in the most critical educational areas.

From the perspective of improving school district systems, I think the major strategy of H.101, literacy grants, will be inadequate to improve outcomes. I propose an alternative strategy below that leverages local school board oversight and the use of data which I think will be more successful in eliciting the necessary systems response in literacy. This type of approach could then be scaled for other curriculum areas.

Also, I am not confident that a lack of resources is the issue as much of a prioritization of existing resources. I would point out that our school districts have significant federal resources through their Title grants and IDEA-B funds that could be used for literacy reform efforts. Additionally, ESSER II funds have a new prioritization on learning loss that could leveraged for literacy reform.

I think the larger challenge is focus, prioritization, and systems coherence, not resources. I would predict if we do not attend to the underlying systems issues, the additional resources provided through literacy grants have a very small chance of having the intended impact.

Below is an alternative proposal for improving literacy outcomes that enhances the development of school districts as systems.

### Background and Rationale

Addressing literacy outcomes is a key strategy for the successful implementation of Act 173. Findings from the DMG study that informed Act 173 support the urgency to improve Vermont's literacy outcomes relative to special education reform:

- "Investing in the effectiveness of core reading instruction is critical for students in general education and students with disabilities"
- "Students with mild-to-moderate disabilities who struggle with reading may not be supported by teachers skilled in the teaching of reading."
- "While some special education teachers across the SU/SDs had a strong background in the teaching of reading, others indicated that they did not have the training or background to be effective supporting students struggling in reading."

The data indicates that Vermont needs to improve its literacy outcomes at the early grades:

- SBAC results from 2016 to 2018 indicate that only about 50% of 3rd graders were proficient in English Language Arts in each of these years.
- From 2015-2019, Vermont's average scale in Grade 4 reading on the NAEP dropped every year from a high of 230 to a low score of 222.

The COVID-19 emergency has adversely affected student academic and developmental progress. Failure to address literacy outcomes now could significantly impact student development for many years to come since literacy is foundational to the success of each student.

### Proposal for Legislation

The Agency of Education recommends the following addition to statute to accomplish to bring coherence to the state's approach to literacy:

- Amend 16 V.S.A. § 261a (Duties of Supervisory Union Boards):
  - Require each supervisory union board to have a literacy policy that requires:
    - The implementation of a benchmark literacy assessment for all students in grades PreK-3 with scores that can be reported as Lexile scores to the Agency of Education;

- A process for identifying struggling readers, including students with Dyslexia, and a description of the intervention processes dedicated to address the needs of these students; and
- The board to formally review and publish an annual monitoring report on student literacy outcomes.
- Require each supervisory union board to conduct an annual evaluation of superintendent job performance including goals for improving student literacy outcomes.

The Agency further recommends that the General Assembly direct the Secretary to review teacher preparation programs and report back to the General Assembly on to what extent these programs prepare teacher candidates to use science-based literacy materials and programs.