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Testimony on H.101 - Literacy Support.

Testimony To: House Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted By: Marjorie Y. Lipson, Ph.D.

I am Marjorie Lipson, Professor Emerita, University of Vermont. My area of professional expertise is literacy – specifically reading and reading difficulties, with a special focus on grades K-6. I have written several textbooks on the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties and on the teaching of reading broadly. I have conducted research on, and supported professional development in, the teaching of reading for decades. Over the past 20 years, I have worked extensively with teachers and educational leaders on whole school improvement in Vermont schools. Before I started my academic career, I taught in urban and bilingual schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Washington, D. C.

I testified last year at this time about the bill that this committee was considering. I have followed the evolution of that work closely and what to express my admiration for the hard work and thoughtful consideration that has resulted in H.101. As stated, the goal and intent of this bill is to provide “grant funding to build systems-driven, sustainable literacy support for all students with measurable outcomes” (p. 1, lines 8-9).

The problem of reading difficulty deserves our very best thinking and I support the approach you are proposing. I am especially appreciative of the recognition that there is a straightforward, but not easy, remedy to the problem we face: improve teacher expertise and also the systems that support this work. This bill seeks to do this

I do have several comments that I would like to encourage the committee to consider related to expertise, systems, and assessment:

- **Expertise.** Effective teachers and their colleagues must make decisions – about all manner of things having to do with assessment and instruction. Most teachers genuinely want to do better. However, they understand that it is a different thing to teach groups of diverse students in complex instructional contexts than to know how reading works. **Both types of expertise are essential.** Not just knowing – but, knowing when to do what is the hallmark of an expert. This is one of the reasons that coaches are so important to this endeavor. The idea of developing expertise could be much more visible in the bill. Participants will be more successful if they are clear about what they are trying to accomplish.
- **Systems.** This past June, I presented a webinar for ILA entitled, *Early Reading Difficulties: Improving Outcomes for All Students*. A preview is available at the ILA site for non-members: <https://ila.digitellinc.com/ila/sessions/296/view>. After my webinar, I received a lengthy email from an African-American teacher in Mississippi. In it, she described her own credentials (impeccable) and also the failure-to-function-appropriately

system within which she works. She has been made impotent to use her knowledge and skill in a professionally responsible way by rigid requirements that were meant to improve outcomes but which have, in fact, exacerbated the problem.

My colleagues, Jim Mosenthal, and I studied successful and less-successful schools in Vermont in the 1990s. One distinguishing characteristic of successful schools was a factor we called “teacher autonomy exercised responsibly.” Creating systemic structures that can support a growth mentality and insist on effective decision making is essential. This bill has done the right thing by allowing systems to identify **their own problems of practice**. Not because it’s the “Vermont way” but, because different systems have different people, resources, histories. They do not all need the same improvement plans. You heard Libby Bonsteel on Friday refer to “**literacy audits**” conducted by PLL. Finding out what is working and where things can get better is important and might be built into this legislative framework. Similarly, the Self-Assessment Tool, linked to the VTmtss is a vehicle for doing this.

- **Assessment.** Excellent teaching is not possible without high-quality assessment. As I noted in my introduction of myself, I have a long professional commitment to assessment. That long consideration has led me to conclude that we need to proceed with extreme caution when advocating the use of assessment. I authored the Assessment section of the Vtmtss Field Guide (2019) (https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vtmtss-field-guide-2019_0.pdf). It may be heavy lifting for the non-educator but there are three points I’d like to make here:
 - assessment should always start with **purpose** – why are we doing this assessment?
 - the assessment information generated should be **trustworthy** and provide students with the chance to demonstrate their learning;
 - the assessment information should be **useful**.

With regard to early literacy, the assessment challenges are many. I would be happy to talk in detail about this (reference the upcoming Assessment Summit). But there are two issues specific to this bill that I would like to address.

- * First, **screening**. Screening is only important and useful when we do not already know much about the student. As a practical matter that means when students first enter school (kindergarten) or when they arrive from another setting. The job of a good screening assessment is to alert us to those students who need a closer look. It does NOT tell us that there is a problem, only that there is reason to collect more information. I believe that this committee has entertained thoughts of requiring/advocating a “dyslexia screening” for all young students. I would urge you to reject this idea for the following reasons:
 - academic screening for very young students is highly unreliable. That is, it does not predict with enough accuracy to ensure against unintended negative results. These early screenings are more accurate in predicting success than failure. Certainly, we would want to gather information about very young students in order to plan appropriate instruction (and flag students who may need further assessment). But, think about a five-year old entering kindergarten and imagine an assessment of letter-name (and maybe even letter-sound) knowledge. If she

does poorly on that assessment – what do we know? Not much. Has she ever had an opportunity to learn that information? Importantly, we do not know how well she will learn the relevant knowledge when provided with instruction.

- Even if early screening were more reliable, generally, we do not have measures to test for dyslexia specifically. Imagine the worry that a parent would have if her child has “diagnosed” as dyslexic. And, what would we do in any event?

If we provide high-quality instruction within a comprehensive system, that child should receive the instruction she needs regardless of the label. If, after appropriate assessment and instruction, she requires more tailored learning, the system can and should provide it.

- * The second issue is related to **outcomes measures**. These, too, are a bit tricky with young students. It is relatively easy to assess what we academics call “constrained skills” (Paris, 2006). That is, skills that develop relatively quickly and can be “mastered.” There are, for example, only 26 letters (although these 26 letters represent between 40-44 sounds in English). The knowledge needed can, and should, be acquired, measured, and monitored in the early years. I do regularly recommend that schools collect data on these constrained skills (phonemic awareness, letter ID, phonics). The mistake would be to think that the acquisition of these skills will *cause* skilled reading moving forward. They are necessary, but not sufficient. This is why it is so important to collect measures of students as they engage in actual reading. That makes lexiles, for example, seem attractive. The problems, here again, are several.
 - With regard to early literacy specifically, lexiles are not applicable to K-1 texts. Teachers (and other concerned individuals) need instructionally useful data in these early years. Children change quickly, and it’s important to capture this and to know how to shape instruction to ensure learning. Lexiles do not provide this information. Even at grades 2-3, the lexile intervals are not sensitive enough for most uses.
 - As Libby Bonsteel noted last week, there are other problems with lexiles (and most other readability measures). They do not account for prior knowledge, text type or content. Using only one indicator is problematic.
- **Sustainability.** Our research on successful schools in Vermont revealed that truly successful schools (schools where 80% or more of the students achieve at the benchmark), take time to create. Each of them had been working improving literacy outcomes for 5-8 years! It is possible to make significant improvements in less time than that, but sustainability is a real problem. About 10 years ago, a colleague and I began to work with one of Vermont’s larger schools in a systemic way to improve K-2 literacy. I have attached a summary of the salient features of this 3-year project. As you can see, the data are impressive. Even this very brief summary shows that there were many aspects of expertise and systems support required to make this happen.

I have 2 reasons for sharing this example. The first, of course, is that it’s a success story. It did not happen because everyone adopted a specific approach to phonics. It did happen because of a multi-faceted approach to professional learning, coaching, and systems support. Importantly, these improvements had another felicitous effect. The cascading effect of improvement released resources for other work. The resources that were

directed to providing explicit support to a large number of students can be redirected to improve instruction elsewhere.

The second reason is to make a different point. What this chart does NOT show is what has happened since. Over the next 4 years, the leadership at the district level changed – superintendent, curriculum coordinator and building principal(s). During this period, teachers who had been participants in this project, who had gained expertise, were swooped up by other school districts. Two experienced reading specialists left. After these 4 years, a decline began until the data for students at grades K-1 look quite a lot like the data we faced years ago. The good news is that students at the end of grade 2 have sustained quite a bit of that growth. Two significant factors include a devoted reading specialist who has maintained the practices acquired during that time and some enduring expertise at the district level. However, the major issue is how to sustain excellence over time.

- **Miscellany.** I want to be sure to reinforce a point I made last year.
 - We should always strive to base our teaching (and leadership) on evidence-based practices. However, at the very earliest levels, only Reading Recovery and the Interactive Strategies Approach meet the standards of evidence as detailed by the federally sponsored *What Works Clearinghouse*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>. It is really positive that you have left the door open to a variety of approaches, particularly in relation to some of the components of literacy. For example, there is evidence that phonics instruction should be included in early reading but that no one approach is significantly better than another. Importantly, since most people acquire these skills – even if some take longer than others -- they are not good predictors of subsequent success in reading (see Paris, 2006). **A variety of approaches to teaching phonics have been found to be more or less equally valuable for students experiencing reading difficulties.** The only reliable differences are comparisons between phonics instruction and NO phonics instruction.
 - Regarding individual differences. The challenge isn't "dealing with" differences.... It's planning for them. Several individuals have noted that references to "multiple intelligence" as a source of variation is not likely to be fruitful and I would like to reinforce that critique. We need to be very attentive to differences in knowledge, skill, and prior knowledge, but there is little research to support the idea that multiple intelligences can/should be a primary source of variation in learning. However, there is a substantial body of evidence to suggest that tailoring instruction to students' needs/strengths is critical.

Thank you, again for your exceptional work in this committee.

Respectfully submitted,
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