

Hello Committee Members,

My name is Katie Ballard and for those of you I haven't met I am a Special Education Parent Advocate working with families across Vermont and also have two sons in special education. Last year myself and other parents (and advocates) spent hours in your committee rooms listening to testimony and giving ours. Listening to the discussions in both committees around literacy has been amazing this year, long over due and yet extremely disappointing. Between the two committees last year testimony was heard from more than 30 parents, teachers and children who shared shockingly similar experiences of how their system failed them when it came to literacy. The hardest part of that conversation is the immediate reaction to hear this as an emotional, or unique experience because it's heartbreaking to see and hear the pain first hand but we can not continue the status quo.

There has long been a perception that there is a war between sides around the science of reading and balanced literacy. As parents, and residents of Vermont with interest in this topic I can assure you- we do not want to continue the status quo and have worked hard to become active, informed participants in the literacy reform conversation. NOT participants in a war or the blame game. All three of us were appointed to our state advisory panel and have engaged in forming special Ed parent advisories in our local districts. We have shown that we can bring out of the box ideas, research and information from all sources, and share our experiences in a collaborative best intention process. Last year one of our biggest themes and pleas to both committees was to be intentional about seeking and considering parental input. Bring the parent voice to the table in a structured, inclusive, equitable manner. As parents and "regular" people we don't have the same access to policy makers and this year has made that painfully obvious. There has been more than 10 witnesses testifying on this bill and committee amendment discussions already scheduled. Yet not one parent has been heard or asked. I know that they have reached out and expressed interest and it's disappointing to see that it seems the committee would again exclude, or unilaterally give priority to the various agencies and lobbyist that have allowed the literacy crisis to continue over the last decade. The same voices have been arguing the same points and the truth is none of you are the ones that have to live with the inability to change the conversation in a huge way. Vermont is one of 4 states without any dyslexia laws, and one of the only states without a law, a dyslexia handbook, or a state task force. Why is this happening? While Vermont is very unique we do not need to reinvent the wheel when so many states have shown not only are they serious about putting the words on paper-they actively stepped up. H. 101 is a huge improvement from last year, and while we will be increasing our active engagement as we see these bills move forward and ensure our voice is heard, we wanted to offer resources to consider and one other big way this bill could be improved.

Across the country literacy has been an issue and many places are trying creative out of the box ideas to solve the crisis, some have taken legislative action to prescribe universal screeners and protocols, while others have been lead by the State Education Departments or Boards. In Vermont we always say local control rules everything but I think there must be a balance. We would like you to consider and hear our testimony related to h101

and the creation of a state literacy task force that can explore and provide guidance to support the AOE as well as supervisory unions. This has been done across the country and in the chart we attached there are links to each state's specific task force resources. Some are websites with resources, others are final reports, others discuss the way the task force collaboratively supports both the children and educators in solving this crisis. There is also state by state links to each law passed or introduced that might be helpful for comparison. In addition there are links to each manual or resource related to dyslexia or learning disabilities. Again you can easily see the ways this could benefit everyone in this process and bring all the voices and stakeholder groups necessary into a structured forum for change to happen. We do not need to argue about what is failing, or why this isn't necessary because there are already pieces of this in place. This is not only necessary but long overdue and Vermont is not special enough to rationalize being so far behind in this conversation. We have some of the most skilled, and knowledgeable educators and administrators here and we have heard time and time again that the concern for putting more burden on local agencies is significant. By creating a task force solely charged with literacy initiatives other states have seen huge progress in closing the gap. Task forces have been successful in creating a manual/ resource for States specific to dyslexia or other identified learning disabilities. These guides don't specifically have to require one measure or plan for interventions but could be a resource that gives educators guidance and makes resources easily available for parents to be informed. This group has also been tasked with various other aspects like recommending benchmark measures, universal screenings, reviewing pilot programs and data trends. The group would include the professionals, parents, and other professionals determined necessary and be a collaborative intentional group. This would potentially eliminate some of the additional strains this research and discussion puts on each district, the state and honestly this body. This allows professionals to offer recommendations and guidance while considering the on the ground implementation and experience for everyone.

This deserves and requires the same research and consideration for what has been shown to be successful in recent years and give our students, our children a chance for a better education and our educators the resources and support they need to do everything we ask of them. And so far multiple administrators and educators have expressed support and interest.

I would really ask both committees to consider engaging with non affiliated advocates and parents to share their respectful input and offer important input to solving this. We met with Secretary French and he told us to draft a proposal and he will help find the right avenue for it but we also offer our testimony to your committees to share input and parent feedback to help 101 before you hammer out amendments. Often times it feels like taxpayer advocacy is an after thought, and frankly I think that furthers the divide between parents and school officials. You do so much work and collaboration before you engage with us that it's frustrating and exhausting to rethink the same conversations based on new feedback. I would point out that most of the significant changes in proposal and input shared this year echo the very bullet points hundreds of Vermonters urged you to consider when they signed our petition by sharing dozens of personal experiences in an effort to effect change. Please show the students that spoke to you, and the family

members relying on you that you do value regular people engaging in policy conversations by being intentional and open to our involvement before the deadline.

Thank you for your service, and for the hard questions and dedication in the last few weeks. We are watching and hoping for real action this year. Attached in a document with the resources listed above as well as articles from other states related to grants or creative initiatives, links to examples of benchmarked, universal screeners, professional development and much more. We tried to make it as user friendly and inclusive as possible but if there is anything we can clarify or provide further information on please don't hesitate to reach out. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with you all!

Thank you

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