



Vermont
Superintendents
Association

February 5, 2021

To: House Education Committee

From: Chelsea Myers, Associate Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Re: An act relating to the implementation of 2018 Acts and Resolves No. 173 by providing grant funding to build systems-driven, sustainable literacy support for all students with measurable outcomes

Thank you for inviting testimony from the Vermont Superintendents Association on the important topic of literacy instruction and outcomes. The testimony will aim to both (1) speak directly to the proposed legislation and (2) provide further considerations on the subject of literacy policy and reform.

First, it is important to state that VSA and its members view the improvement of literacy instruction and subsequently, literacy outcomes as critically important. We ask that any policy directive on literacy consider the following:

1. Equity must be at the forefront of this work. Data indicate that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, BIPOC students, English language learners, and students with disabilities are disproportionately not getting what they need from the system to succeed in learning to read and write at the benchmarks set for all students. Equitable access to highly skilled instruction must be a top priority in supporting this work. This can likely not be achieved without additional targeted resources.
2. Recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators that are highly skilled in reading instruction is a challenge and also a non-negotiable in being able to successfully implement any literacy reform. The ability to recruit highly-skilled teachers is disparate around the state.
3. Accountability through data is not successful without a clear vision of outcomes, targeted supports, and a growth mindset.
4. Set targeted outcomes but allow LEAs to determine the best methods to achieve those outcomes based on the work already taking place in their communities.
5. All literacy reform decisions should be informed by skilled literacy experts.

6. To the extent possible, legislation should consider the myriad of initiatives on school district's plates and create expectations and timelines accordingly.

Response to the proposed draft bill:

Findings:

We appreciate the reference to Act 173 and ask that due consideration be given to the structures already outlined in that piece of legislation and other state law and policy (e.g. VTmtss, Education Quality Standards). The law also makes reference to support provided to the field from the Agency of Education to implement the findings from the DMG report.

We recommend that reference to disaggregated data that point to the inequities in access to literacy be highlighted in the findings.

Sec. 3. Literacy Grant Program:

First, thank you for recognizing that to support literacy, we must strongly support our teachers and administrators. A couple of key considerations in the grant process outlined in H.101 include:

- Utilizing the structures already outlined in Act 173 is a useful starting point for this work.
- Please consider revising the instances where the term 'learning styles' is used. There is no scientific evidence to support the idea that learning styles exist, unnecessarily categorize learners, and may result in a fixed mindset about learning.
- Splitting funding amongst supervisory unions might need some additional considerations. We recommend speaking to business managers to determine if and how this would work.
- The language makes reference to 'master teachers'. It is worth noting that the availability and retention of 'master teachers' is disparate around the state. Our state is grappling with huge challenges in recruitment and retention that must be considered.
- In general, this grant process is complex and has a lot of requirements, which is made even more challenging when coordinating amongst supervisory unions. For example, responsibility to grant reporting through the 2029-2030 is a tall ask. While monitoring data and supporting students is crucial in literacy work, any grant process requires considerable administrative time and costs. The lengthy

requirements might deter systems from pursuing the funds, especially those that operate with fewer resources to begin with.

Sec. 5. Duties of Supervisory Union Board

We believe this is a useful idea. Schools are already using benchmark literacy assessments to monitor student progress in academic skill areas, including reading. Statewide data from PreK to Grade 3 should be used to monitor progress in literacy achievement, and subsequently to inform professional learning and future policy initiatives. To ensure this connection, the measures collected and reported to the Agency of Education should be informed by skilled reading experts. The Agency of Education should outline what it expects to do with the data collected. Any benchmark literacy assessment should be specifically tied to professional development for instructors on how to use the data collected to inform instruction and support students. We also, respectfully request that you check with the Vermont School Boards Association on any issues related to board policy.

Other policy considerations:

Early language and literacy development are highly correlated with later school achievement. Children exposed to rich language environments, more enriching experiences, and books throughout early development are more likely to succeed academically later in life. Some potential policy and practice suggestions:

- Community resources for reaching out to parents and caregivers to increase language development in the early years, such as is seen in the [Reach Out and Read Program](#).
- Include early childhood education in the review of teacher preparation programs.
- Training and support for examining instruction and curricula in the state's early childhood programs. Resource: [Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years](#)
- Consider elements of programs like [Providence Talks](#) that aim to close the 'word gap'.

[Network Improvement Communities](#) are a concept already supported by the Agency of Education and professional learning communities are widely employed by school districts and our Associations. Using data to identify those schools and communities that are exhibiting marked growth in addressing literacy and closing opportunity gaps and sharing the processes those communities have used to get there is a way to optimize the collective knowledge around literacy already in Vermont.

Funding reading coaches in high-need schools is a strategy used in other states, according to a report by the [Council of Chief State School Officers' Policy Brief on 3rd Grade Reading Laws](#). The report also notes that “there is a strong body of evidence that coaches can effectively improve teacher practices in elementary school literacy”. Teachers are the most important factor in schools in impacting student outcomes. Finding ways to support literacy coaches for Vermont’s schools could be a high-leverage means to improving literacy outcomes for students.

Connecting work already underway on anti-bias and culturally responsive pedagogy to the work on literacy could be an important means to reduce the barriers the system places on historically underserved students. Some connections between this work include:

- The availability and use of texts that are culturally relevant and representative of historically marginalized voices is critical to ensure that all students have the opportunity to connect their experiences to the text they are reading. For example, some school libraries have conducted audits to begin to understand and address representation in their offered texts.
- Though often unintentional, implicit biases can impact the expectations for students. Expectations for students impacts the way that educators interact with students and ultimately is correlated with student achievement.