

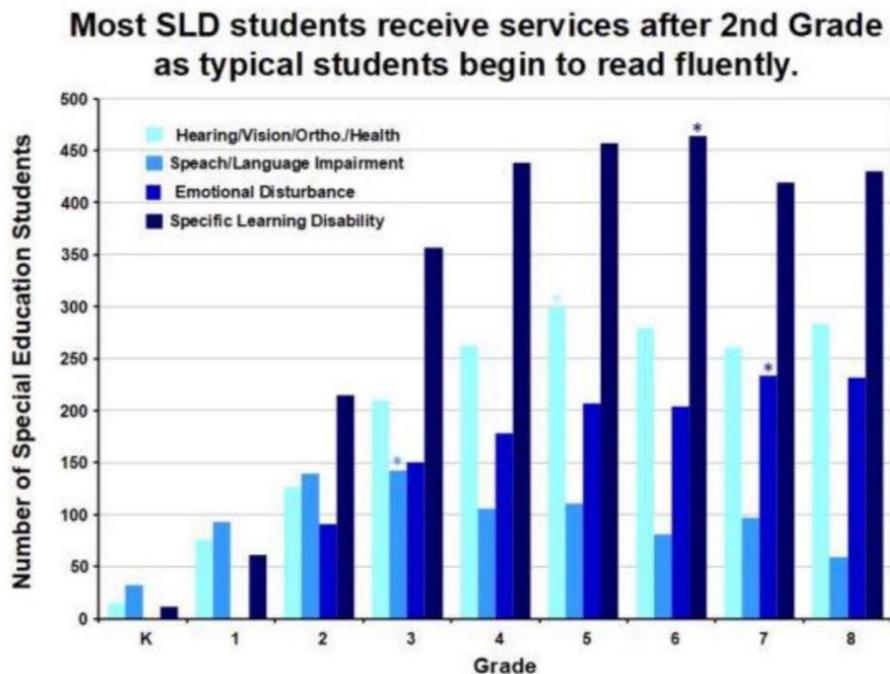
February 26, 2021

Chairman Webb and members of the Vermont House Education Committee

RE: House Bill: H.101 - 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

Good afternoon,

I would like to begin by thanking this Committee for considering adding a literacy task force to Bill H.101. I believe this aid the AOE and our LEA's in improving student literacy outcomes. As the members of this Committee are aware, I have been actively following the testimonies given on H.101 this legislative session and there seems to be a common philosophy with the professionals who have testified. Whenever the term dyslexia is used, specifically around the concern of late identification for students with dyslexia, the majority of the professionals have not supported addressing this concern in any legislation. Many reference IDEA and Child Find as protections afforded these students. The graph below was shared with the Senate Committee on Education by Dr. Blanche Podhajski. Dr. Podhajski is the founder and President of the Stern Center here in VT.



The data is direct – students classified under the Specific Learning Disability category are not being identified until 3rd grade or after. There's undeniable proof that the current protections alone are not adequately addressing the problem. As a result, students across Vermont are deprived of their college and career opportunities.

In my testimony from February 23, 2021, I recommended the establishment of a Literacy Task Force. There were many areas of concern that I had requested the Task Force address but the two I would like to speak directly to in this letter are the recommendation to create a universal state-wide literacy benchmark screener and to create a resource that includes the characteristics of dyslexia for all

Tier 1 and Tier 2 educators. Both are essential for adequately identify students who may be at risk of reading failure due to dyslexia.

I'm not going to go into great detail about the need for a benchmark screener but in the last couple of years there has been an increase in the number of states that have developed universal screeners to proactively identify students, before failure, who may be at risk of having dyslexia. I would like to share a quick overview of the purpose of a universal screener and how it relates to dyslexia identification. The below paragraph is from the *Screening of Dyslexia* report. The research found in this report includes information on policy, emerging research, and best-practices. It was funded by a grant to the National Center on Improving Literacy from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs. The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education works to improve the achievement of students in preschool through secondary school. The office also works to ensure equal education opportunities for all students.

The purpose of universal *screening* for dyslexia risk is very different than the purpose of *diagnosing* dyslexia. Screening determines the level of risk for reading problems in general and the potential risk of having or developing dyslexia. It is not appropriate to use screening results to formally diagnose whether an individual actually has dyslexia. Accordingly, universal screening for dyslexia risk follows a qualitatively different process than the process used for diagnosing dyslexia. Screening procedures for dyslexia risk should be efficient and inexpensive and should be used for all students in a classroom. In contrast, diagnosis or identification of dyslexia requires a more comprehensive, time consuming, and expensive evaluation procedures and should only be applied to individuals in the population that have demonstrated elevated levels of risk demonstrated by screening results, have not responded adequately for generally effective early reading intervention, or both.

It's important to note that universal screening aids in identifying students at-risk of reading failure but they alone will not differentiate students who have dyslexia from those who may be struggling due to other variables. Over-identification is certainly a concern. This is why the request for teacher resources and training on dyslexia and the characteristics of dyslexia, also known as the "red-flag" indicators, is significant. Educators need to possess this knowledge in order to see the underlying characteristics. It's the knowledge the educator possess, along with the data received from the screening, that improves the identification process and ultimately reduces the number of special education referrals to only those students who may have a reading disability. THIS is a comprehensive Child Find process for literacy.

I could certainly provide additional resources, as well as explain what this comprehensive process would look like in the MTSS framework but I know your time is valuable. Please let me know if you have any questions.

I want to thank you again for continuing to improve literacy in Vermont.

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If you would like to read the full *Screening of Dyslexia* report the link is provided below.

<https://improvingliteracy.org/sites/improvingliteracy2.uoregon.edu/files/whitepaper/screening-for-dyslexia.pdf>