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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,

My name is Jamie Crenshaw and I am the mother of 2 dyslexic sons. My fellow parent advocates and I testified several times last year in support of Bill H.668. At that time, we shared with this Committee our private and emotional struggles in trying to obtain early identification and appropriate interventions for our children with dyslexia. Our stories were poignant and spoke directly to the problems we parents have faced every day within our Vermont school districts. We strongly supported the inclusion of a universal benchmark literacy assessment for all students in Kindergarten through grade 3, including a process for identifying struggling readers and students with dyslexia. I felt this was, and still is, a crucial component to improving literacy outcomes for all Vermont students.

I would like to begin my testimony by thanking this Committee for reintroducing literacy legislation focused on improving literacy outcomes for all students and for once again inviting testimony from experts and parents alike. There is a noticeable change in the literacy conversations this legislative session. The change in conversation as well as the enhanced literacy focus occurring throughout Vermont builds a sense of hope that we will create systems of change that will positively impact all Vermont students.

In terms of the actual bill, I want to be completely honest, I am disheartened by the decision the Committee has made to remove from H.101 the section requiring school boards to create a policy that includes a process for identifying struggling readers and students with dyslexia. This Committee has talked about accountability and held it as a priority yet the section that holds schools accountable for early identification and compliance with the federal Child Find law was removed. It's been said that disability identification legislation already exists in Federal law but Federal law alone does not ensure compliance. Policies supported by procedures exist to address important areas of school operation to ensure compliance. Policies and procedures should be comprehensive so as to leave no room for varied interpretations. Policies and procedures support a systems-driven approach and ensures equity for all students. An example: C10: Prevention of Harassment, Hazing and Bullying. C10 is a required policy that all school boards in Vermont must approve and adopt. This is not a new protection for students. In fact there are several preventative protections afforded students already; Vermont's Public Accommodations Act; Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation

Act of 1973; Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and several more. Vermont created a required model policy in addition to the previous protections because it holds the safety and wellbeing of its students as a priority. The academic and mental wellbeing of Vermont students' should to be a priority too. We will never reach our goal of all students being strong independent readers by the end of the third grade unless we start supporting some of our most vulnerable students who struggle with literacy acquisition. These students possess a neurological difference impacting their ability to read but they are no less capable of learning. If H.101's purpose is to build systems-driven, sustainable literacy support for all students, why then remove the part of the legislation that actually holds schools accountable for providing its students, specifically those who struggle and those with reading disabilities, early identification and access to needed supports and services? The decision is puzzling because section (b) also aligns with the intent of Act 173 – enhancing the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services to all students who require additional support. This Committee has discussed and placed as priority accountability, equity, and data-driven decision making. The data is clear. Students are not being identified until 3rd grade or after. They are not receiving an equitable education because schools are failing to identify and support students with reading disabilities before failure. I ask you to reconsider the removal of section (b) from H.101 and in addition, I recommend that you include a provision for the creation of a required Child Find model policy.

Furthermore, I would ask that the Committee consider adding a provision for establishing a Vermont Literacy Task Force. The Task Force would be responsible for developing a literacy guidebook that aligns with literacy best practice and supports the Vermont Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports framework. A framework which guides Vermont educators as they work to prevent difficulties and pro-actively provide supports so that all students can learn to read by the end of 3rd grade. I've had 12 years of lived experience in our Vermont special education system. This experience has afforded me an in-depth understanding of our literacy instruction and intervention both in the general education and special education classrooms. I believe that to help support the Vermont Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports framework, the guidebook should address the DMG report findings and include information on the following literacy areas;

1. To ensure elementary universal instruction meets the needs of most students –
 - a) Create a list of clearly defined structured literacy instructional practices proven effective in improving literacy outcomes for the majority of students in both general education and special education.
 - b) Create a list of approved progress monitoring tools. Progress monitoring has several purposes: to identify students as soon as they begin to fall behind; to modify instruction early enough to ensure each student gains essential skills; and to determine if students are making adequate progress and for students receiving additional supports in Tier 1 or Tier 2, the monitoring tools will determine if they are making adequate progress when provided these additional supports.

- c) Provide all Tier 1 and Tier 2 educators' information on the characteristics of dyslexia by grade. This will aid Tier 1 and Tier 2 educators in identifying students who may have a reading disability and who may be in need early supports offered through special education services. It will also aid Tier 1 and Tier 2 educators in differentiating between students who struggle from those who may be struggling but do not have a disability and require a special education comprehensive evaluation. I believe this will help reduce special education referrals and the resulting over-identification of students.
- d) Create a universal state-wide literacy benchmark screener for kindergarten through grade 3 which includes measuring student proficiency of the five components of reading, plus letter naming fluency since it is a strong predictor of later reading success. This will enable educators to:
 - i. Identify students who are making adequate progress and those who have already mastered the five components of reading. They can then modify their instruction to better challenge these students.
 - ii. Identify students as soon as they begin to fall behind. The benchmark data should identify the lowest skill deficit in struggling readers. The lowest skill is the point where targeted instruction should begin because it represent where the breakdown in mastery has occurred. Knowing the lowest skill deficit for all classroom students enable the teacher to modify instruction and provide targeted interventions delivered in small group settings within the general education. This aligns with the DMG report of ensuring learners who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers. An added benefit, the data derived from the assessments will also aid schools in determining what areas may need professional development.
 - iii. Fulfill the requirement of Child Find for students with a reading disability. Any student who is identified with low skill deficits in letter naming fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics and who may have dyslexia characteristics (as found in the newly created AOE resource), shall be referred to special education for a comprehensive academic evaluation. This guarantees the students who need targeted intervention services will be taught by highly skilled reading specialist. The reading specialists must be knowledgeable both about dyslexia and how it impacts a student's ability to learn and the science of reading.

With respect to systems-driven. The question that comes to mind - systems driven at what level? The bill states at the supervisory union level. This is the current approach, and as I see it, the current approach is one that is individually driven. We believe in local control. As far as I'm concerned, this is one of the main obstacles in terms of changing literacy practice and outcomes. We can remain locally controlled-individually driven to a certain extent but if systems-driven is the goal then it should refer to an approach where certain criteria or non-negotiable standards are set at the state-level and schools are held accountable to following

the set standards. The reality is that these standards already exist and are laid out very clearly in the Common Core State Standards, in the Vermont Early Learning Standards and in State and Federal law. It is clear that the current locally controlled-individually driven approach has failed. We've let the schools carry unnecessary authority in terms of literacy practices and interventions and it has led to inefficiency. The benefits of creating a state-level systems driven approach cannot be overemphasized. It would bring transparency, clarity, and accountability to all Vermont schools. If the priority is to have all students reading by the end of third grade then we must start to follow the many other states, including Mississippi, who have enacted legislation that holds schools accountable, creates equitable standards, and is truly systems-driven.

In closing, I want to thank you for the time this Committee has given to listening to all of the testimonies and thank you for considering all of the recommendations.

Respectfully submitted,
Jamie Crenshaw