



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION  
MEMO  
From the Desk of Jay Nichols

H.101 Testimony  
House Education  
Date: February 5, 2021

Testimony on grant funding to build systems-driven, sustainable literacy support for all students with measurable outcomes.

I agree with the DMG report on the five recommendations on best practices for the delivery of special education services (and, in fact, all instructional services). Actual implementation of 173 will provide school leaders and school districts with more latitude to address these recommendations, as they will not be prohibited by unnecessary bureaucratic special education rules bound to a funding system that encourages inefficiencies and actually incentivizes the likely use of less skillful educators, and even paraeducators, to instruct the most needy students.

The number one academic goal in all schools must be to make sure that students are functionally independent readers by the conclusion of third grade. At the same time, be careful about relying solely on standardized test scores. Although these can be useful, they often

are a false standard set by academia. Looking at individual growth year over year using standardized assessments, scale scores, and the results of regular formative assessments that are reliable and verifiable is a much better indicator of student reading strength and growth.

The research coming out of Brown and other places on academic achievement during the pandemic are important considerations - but we must remember that most of our younger students still received the majority of their instruction in person this academic year. Yes, they missed a lot last spring, and some this school year, but our relatively low virus rates compared to other states likely puts us in a better place comparatively. This is because we have been much more able to provide in person instruction to our younger students than most other states. However, it is important to note that virtually all researchers and academic experts are predicting a greater impact on our most vulnerable students, especially in relationship to socio-economic status, when discussing learning loss.

A key factor is the insistence that "students who are not attaining grade level benchmarks are identified and instruction is delivered by master teachers experienced in the advancement of the targeted grade level skills and understanding." How will this occur? Will schools use the grant monies to hire this staff or to hire someone to free up the regular schedule of the "master teacher?" It is important to note that it is very likely that the master teacher is already employed by the school. If these grant funds can be used to help schools creatively design strategies to provide reading support to students, they will certainly be welcome and hopefully impactful resources.

In terms of grant applications: please make sure the focus is on need; not on which systems can write the best grant applications. I know the bill calls for

Supervisory Unions and Supervisory Districts to collaborate with other systems. It has been my experience that the systems who need this type of support the most, don't really understand that they need it, or are so busy just trying to tread water in their system that they can't go out searching for necessary resources. In fact, I'd rather it was more of an invitation process to districts with strong need rather than an application process.

I would like to see any benchmark assessment be statewide. I know some systems will be upset about this. But if the Agency of Education is really to be in a position in which they can provide support to the field they need to have real time data from which to work. If the AOE can better ascertain in which systems strong reading growth is occurring, and which systems are struggling, they can better intervene to support those systems that need extra levels of support. This should not be seen in a disciplinary light. We should all want the same thing - all of our students being strong independent readers by the end of third grade. In the early years, students are learning to read; after third grade the switch is to mostly reading to learn. Students that are not strong readers by the end of third grade face an uphill battle for the remainder of their academic careers absent some really strong intervention in the form of extra instruction and better instruction to fill any gaps. Weak reading skills has a negative impact on all other academic content areas.

Lastly, I think we need to think from an upstream approach. Be proactive as best we can. Although not specifically about this bill, one high leverage strategy we can use to improve students reading ability is to develop an early kindergarten full-day program for our 4 year-old students in Vermont. This will give educators an extra year to support students, especially those with major vocabulary and word comprehension

gaps. The better our students are in terms of early reading skills - which predominately ties back to vocabulary - the more likely they will be successful lifelong readers.

I would be glad to talk to the committee at another time regarding general reading research.