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Testimony to House Committee on Education

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Hello. My name is Dr. Rob Schulze, and I am the professor of special education at Northern Vermont University Johnson. I am pleased to speak on behalf of Northern Vermont University in regard to literacy education at the college and the proposed literacy bill.

I testified in a previous version of this bill one year ago, and I discussed in detail how NVU trains teachers in K-3 literacy. I won't do that again, but I will summarize. In terms of how NVU prepares K-3 to teach literacy, we take a multi-year approach. We don't do separate elementary and special education training programs, but rather one inclusive childhood education degree, where all students graduate with both regular and special education endorsements. As such, there are multiple courses that focus only on literacy and several others where it is reinforced. Literacy instruction begins in the sophomore year and continues to graduation. There are three courses which have literacy as the primary focus. One is on the foundations of text skills such as reading level and text complexity analysis, another is a primary literacy instruction course with practicum hours in a public school, and the third is specifically a literacy intervention course for teaching struggling readers. In addition, there are several other courses where literacy – both in regular and special education setting and methods – are taught and referenced. In the senior year, the students do a full-year in public schools, with time divided among regular and special education, much of the time devoted to hands-on learning for reading instruction.

This is a summary – the last time I was here I had three typed pages just on this – but I hope that it gets you the idea. Things which have changed since last year when I testified before you are that the University is currently searching for a new faculty member to be based on the Lyndon campus who will have a dual specialty in special education and literacy instruction. This will enable us to increase our

effectiveness in this specific area. Our faculty have also made a conscious effort to address both technical literacy approaches and critical, socio-cultural literacy, both of which are required to build competent and engaged readers.

In terms of the bill being proposed, I expressed support for it last year and I still support it this year. However, some of the emphases have changed for me. When I read this bill last year, it seemed to me to be largely preventative in nature. What I mean is, it would provide enhancements to make sure that reading instruction was improved so that problems either would not develop or would be corrected before they became severe. This, I felt, was a great strength of the bill. It is far better to focus on struggling students early and work with them right away than to wait until they are far behind and eligible for special education and then try to make up large gaps.

The coronavirus has changed some of this calculus, however. As referenced in the text of the bill, achievement gaps as a result of remote learning and other educational interruptions are becoming more and more clear. I believe that the full depth of the deficits and gaps that current students will have in their education will not be fully known until the pandemic ends and students are back in schools full-time, whenever that is.

As a result of this, when I read over the bill this week it spoke to me most about the incredible need we will have for remediation. I simply believe that schools do not have the current capacity to work with the sheer number of students who will need additional instruction. There are not enough literacy interventionists to work with the typical number of struggling students, let alone the upcoming wave. If students who are behind in second grade now aren't remediated, then our high school special education numbers in seven years will have exploded.

In reading the bill last year, I was most struck by increasing leadership capacity for literacy, and by increasing the number of literacy coaches to help spread evidence-based literacy instruction

throughout the schools. This year, in my reading of the bill, I am most grateful to see the stipulation about using grant money for additional staff. I think that both approaches will be needed. Schools will need to use this money to simultaneously increase their staffs and train them to a high level. It will be a daunting task. I honestly am not sure that a two-year period will be enough, or that a K-3 focus is broad enough. Students who have spent their third grade not progressing in remote instruction will be fourth and fifth and sixth graders who still need remediation. I understand the limits of the bill and the clear evidence behind the important of early elementary literacy. I support the bill as written. However, I would not be surprised if your committee is considering middle grades reading intervention in the coming years. Education gaps created in one year may need multiple years to close.

To sum up, I support this bill and believe it is truly needed. However, whereas last year I thought it was a way to improve education going forward, today I see it is a way to stop some of the bleeding, and I hope it is not the last initiative that comes through this committee.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer questions.