

**Vermont Senate Education Committee,  
Vermont State Senate**

**Testimony of the Advisory Council on Literacy and the Advisory Council on Literacy's  
Annual Report for 2021**

**Submitted and presented by Gwen Carmolli, Advisory Council on Literacy Chair**

**January 17, 2022**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today to present the Advisory Council on Literacy's annual report and initial work.

The Council is deeply committed to the work of increasing literacy outcomes for students across the state. We have membership representing a wide variety of organizations, roles and expertise, and share a common focus on improving literacy outcomes for all students in the State.

**Membership**

Membership for this Council is outlined in Act 28. There are 16 members with representatives from the organizations or constituencies below.

**Ex Officio Roles and Current Members:**

- Vermont Secretary of Education, Daniel French
- Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators (VSBPE), Bill Clark
- Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA), Chelsea Myers
- Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA), Martine Gulick
- Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA), Darren McIntyre
- Vermont Principals' Association (VPA), Beth O'Brien, Vice Chair
- Vermont Independent Schools Association (VISA), Susan Gray
- Vermont-National Education Association (VT NEA), Donald Tinney

**Two-Year Term Roles and Current Members:**

- Vermont Curriculum Leaders Association, Gwen Carmolli, Chair
- Vermont-National Education Association (VT NEA) Teachers - Catherine Campbell, Jennifer Farnsworth, Susan Koch
- Community Members - Cynthia Gardner-Morse, Emily Lesh, Julia Spaulding
- Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE) Special Education Specialist, Jacqui Kelleher

**Charge**

Our charge, stated in the beginning of Act 28, is to “**advise** the Agency of Education, the State Board of Education, and the General Assembly on how to improve proficiency outcomes in literacy for students in prekindergarten through grade 12 and how to sustain those outcomes”, with a clear set of tasks to advise:

1. Advise the Agency of Education on how to update Section 2903 of Title I6 (statute 2903), implement the statewide literacy plan, and maintain the statewide literacy plan

2. Advise the Agency of Education on supports to implement the literacy plan, and on staffing and resources needed at the Agency to support the statewide effort to improve literacy
3. Develop a plan for collecting literacy-related data, that informs instructional practices, professional development, literacy proficiencies, and progress of literacy outcomes
4. Recommend best practices of tier 1, 2 and 3 literacy instruction in the multitiered system of supports
5. Review literacy assessment outcomes and provide ongoing advice on how to continuously improve those outcomes

### **Process**

The Council is working through the tasks outlined, using existing statutes, requirements, and key resources to inform deliberation and decisions.

Tasks and decisions made by the Council will be guided using Act 28, Act 173, Vermont's Education Quality Standards (EQS), District Management Group (DMG) Report, § 2902, and § 2903 - statutes and resources that are current requirements and supporting resources for Act 28.

Decisions and recommendations will be made in alignment with Act 28, Act 173, and Vermont's Education Quality Standards (EQS), the following criteria. Decisions and recommendations need to:

- Address the need to increase literacy outcomes
- Address the need to close achievement gaps
- Support Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Support evidence-based instructional practices and intervention
- Promote and sustain the improvement of literacy outcomes

The Council uses a process to review information, gather input, deliberate, and then build consensus. Members are invited to reach out to constituency groups to gather input for the Council to consider, which are then deliberated and narrowed by the Council. Advice and recommendations represent consensus agreement.

### **Meetings**

The Advisory Council on Literacy may meet up to 8 times in a year, August through July. The Council has met 5 times this school year (4 as of the submission of the report), with 3 more meetings scheduled for the 2021-2022 school year. We are meeting online due to the pandemic and availability of Council members, following Vermont's Open Meeting guidelines. All meetings are open to the public, with agenda, minutes, and resources available on the Agency of Education's page for the Council.

### **Review & Advice**

The Council began with the last task, task (5), a review of literacy outcomes, to have baseline information about literacy outcomes, and to have clarity of the issues at hand.

The data review showed trends of overall low achievement, achievement gaps, particularly for students experiencing poverty and with disabilities, and a trend of declining achievement scores. There are concerning level of achievement and achievement gaps on the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC): 50% of third grade students failing to meet state standards on Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC); there are 24-30 percentage point differences - achievement gaps - for students in poverty or with disabilities marginalized groups scoring 24-30 percentage points lower than their peers on the ELA portion of SBAC assessment; achievement gaps widen as students' progress through the grades. The state's commitment to improving and sustaining literacy outcomes is critical.

The Council is currently working on task (1), a review of § 2903, and developing advice on the implementation and maintenance of the statewide literacy plan. To date, the Council has reviewed § 2903, and found consensus on several areas of strength, areas to change for alignment, and areas to consider adding to the statute.

The overall findings of the Council were supportive of the statute, with particular agreement and emphasis on the following as strengths of the statute:

***“The ability to read is critical to success in learning.”***

Reading is critical to success in learning, and has implications for success in school and beyond.

***“A public school that offers instruction in grades one, two or three shall provide highly effective, research-based reading instruction to all students.”***

Highly effective, research and evidenced-based literacy instruction is critical for all students.

***“Supplemental reading instruction to any enrolled student in grade four whose reading proficiency falls below third grade reading expectations.”***

Supplemental reading instruction as a critical need when proficiency in reading is below grade level, and it is a critical component of multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

A review of the statute showed 2 areas to change to better align the statute with current requirements and statutes:

**Change research-based to evidence-based** - Federal documents currently reflect evidence-based as the language and requirement for educational criteria and decisions.

**Change/update the statute number to reflect the current MTSS statute -**

The current statute for Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is §2902

The Council agreed on two areas to consider changing or adding:

**Add preschool and kindergarten to section (b) to align § 2903 with Act 28 -**

Prekindergarten and kindergarten are included in Act 28 and are foundational learning

years for learning in future grades. This statute could better align to Act 28 by including prekindergarten and kindergarten in the language.

**Include supplemental reading instruction for learners who may have a need in any grade, not just beyond grade 4** - Students may need supplemental reading instruction in any grade, prekindergarten through grade 12, not just in the grades currently outlined.

It is important to note that this work is ongoing, with many elements of improving literacy outcomes already in progress. The Agency of Education, school systems, schools and teachers are working incredibly hard to provide high quality literacy instruction, and are in the process of implementing multi-tiered systems of support. A great deal of work is underway.

It is also important to note that this work is happening during a pandemic. Systems, schools, teachers, students, and families/caregivers are facing changing conditions and challenges. The focus of literacy improvements is in progress, but may be impacted by the current circumstances.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the annual report of the Advisory Council on Literacy, and for the continued focus on increasing literacy outcomes for all Vermont students.