



February 4, 2021

To: Senate Education Committee

From: Chelsea Myers, Associate Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Re: An act relating to supervisory union board responsibilities for oversight of literacy instruction and outcomes

Thank you for inviting testimony from the Vermont Superintendents Association on the important topic of literacy instruction and outcomes. The testimony will aim to both (1) speak directly to the proposed legislation and (2) provide further considerations on the subject of literacy policy and reform.

First, it is important to state that VSA and its members view the improvement of literacy instruction and subsequently, literacy outcomes as critically important. We ask that any policy directive on literacy consider the following:

1. Equity must be at the forefront of this work. Data indicate that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, BIPOC students, English language learners, and students with disabilities are disproportionately not getting what they need from the system to succeed in learning to read and write at the benchmarks set for all students. Equitable access to highly skilled instruction must be a top priority in supporting this work. This can likely not be achieved without additional targeted resources.
2. Recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators that are highly skilled in reading instruction is a challenge and also a non-negotiable in being able to successfully implement any literacy reform. The ability to recruit highly-skilled teachers is disparate around the state.
3. Accountability through data is not successful without a clear vision of outcomes, targeted supports, and a growth mindset.
4. Set targeted outcomes but allow LEAs to determine the best methods to achieve those outcomes based on the work already taking place in their communities.
5. All literacy reform decisions should be informed by skilled literacy experts.
6. To the extent possible, legislation should consider the myriad of initiatives on school district's plates and create expectations and timelines accordingly.

## Response to the proposed draft bill:

### Findings:

We appreciate the reference to Act 173 and ask that due consideration be given to the structures already outlined in that piece of legislation and other state law and policy (e.g. VTmtss, Education Quality Standards). The law also makes reference to support provided to the field from the Agency of Education to implement the findings from the DMG report.

We recommend that reference to disaggregated data that point to the inequities in access to literacy be highlighted in the findings.

(18) School board policy: The vehicle proposed to facilitate the recommendations in A-C is a board policy. We recommend speaking with the Vermont School Boards Association on the use of board policy to achieve the stated goals. It might be that adopting a school board policy for some of these recommendations is an unnecessary step.

(A) Benchmark literacy assessment: We believe this is a useful idea. Schools are already using benchmark literacy assessments to monitor student progress in academic skill areas, including reading. Statewide data from PreK to Grade 3 should be used to monitor progress in literacy achievement, and subsequently to inform professional learning and future policy initiatives. The Agency of Education should outline what it expects to do with the data collected. Any benchmark literacy assessment should be specifically tied to professional development for instructors on how to use the data collected to inform instruction and support students. Finally, members of our Association wonder about the legitimacy of lexiles as the only reportable indicator to the state.

(B) A process for identifying struggling readers, including those with dyslexia, including an intervention process: Identifying struggling readers, including those *at risk* for dyslexia is a key prevention and early intervention strategy. However, those individuals with a dyslexia diagnosis are supported by Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which includes dyslexia as part of the specific learning disability definition. It is not appropriate to use early screening methods to diagnose dyslexia but instead, to identify all struggling readers, including those that are at a potential risk for developing dyslexia. Our goal in any early screening programs should be to identify all struggling readers. Any process for identifying struggling

readers is only as good as the support to the field on how to read and appropriately respond to the data. A board policy alone will do very little to significantly change how the field is able to respond to evidence that a student is struggling in reading.

(C) Annual monitoring report on student literacy scores from local school boards: It makes sense that data reported to the Agency of Education should also be made publicly available at the local level. Again, increasing the amount of data in the hands of the board is only one piece of the puzzle. School boards must be educated in how to use the data to inform policy decisions at the local level.

(19) Annual evaluation of superintendent job performance including improving student literacy outcomes: Superintendent evaluation is a process determined and supported by local school boards and should remain as such. We highly recommend that you retract this element of the proposed bill. The superintendent is one piece of a large and complex set of influences on literacy outcomes. Tying job performance evaluation to specific academic outcomes is devoid of any data to support its efficacy. It also lacks the recognition and appreciation for the immense number of responsibilities a superintendent and any other education leader has on their plate.

(Sec. 3) Teacher preparation programs; review: We ask that any review enlist the support of skilled literacy experts that are not tied to any particular monetized literacy intervention strategy. The most important characteristics of teacher preparation for literacy instruction are practice, feedback, and coaching. Any comprehensive review will consider these elements as well as the instructional materials provided. We must also include an examination of how we are supporting teachers and administrators already in the field.

The review should also include an examination of the process to become a credentialed literacy instructor. How can we increase the presence of highly-skilled reading teachers in the state, especially in those areas where teacher recruitment and retention is particularly challenging? School districts can not live up to the promises of Act 173 if they are unable to recruit and sustain highly-skilled reading teachers to work with struggling students.

### **Other policy considerations:**

Early language and literacy development are highly correlated with later school achievement. Children exposed to rich language environments, more enriching

experiences, and books throughout early development are more likely to succeed academically later in life. Some potential policy and practice suggestions:

- Community resources for reaching out to parents and caregivers to increase language development in the early years, such as is seen in the [Reach Out and Read Program](#).
- Include early childhood education in the review of teacher preparation programs.
- Training and support for examining instruction and curricula in the state's early childhood programs. Resource: [Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years](#)
- Consider elements of programs like [Providence Talks](#) that aim to close the 'word gap'.

[Network Improvement Communities](#) are a concept already supported by the Agency of Education and [professional learning communities](#) are widely employed by school districts and our Associations. Using data to identify those schools and communities that are exhibiting marked growth in addressing literacy and closing opportunity gaps and sharing the processes those communities have used to get there is a way to optimize the collective knowledge around literacy already in Vermont.

[Funding reading coaches](#) in high-need schools is a strategy used in other states, according to a report by the [Council of Chief State School Officers' Policy Brief on 3rd Grade Reading Laws](#). The report also notes that "there is a strong body of evidence that coaches can effectively improve teacher practices in elementary school literacy". Teachers are the most important factor in schools in impacting student outcomes. Finding ways to support literacy coaches for Vermont's schools could be a high-leverage means to improving literacy outcomes for students.

Connecting work already underway on [anti-bias and culturally responsive pedagogy](#) to the work on literacy could be an important means to reduce the barriers the system places on historically underserved students. Some connections between this work include:

- The availability and use of texts that are culturally relevant and representative of historically marginalized voices is critical to ensure that all students have the opportunity to connect their experiences to the text they are reading. For example, some school libraries have conducted audits to begin to understand and address representation in their offered texts.
- Though often unintentional, implicit biases can impact the expectations for students. Expectations for students impacts the way that educators interact with students and ultimately is correlated with student achievement.

