

February 4, 2021

Memo to: Senate Education Committee

From: Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA

Re: Prepared remarks

Good afternoon, Senators. For the record, I am Don Tinney, president of Vermont-NEA, representing over 12,000 educators from every corner of the state. While I sit before you in my official capacity as the leader of the state's largest labor union, I also am here as a 31-year veteran classroom teacher with professional endorsements as a 7-12 English teacher and a K-12 reading specialist.

I will begin my prepared remarks by applauding your committee for bringing a focus upon literacy in our schools. The fundamental reading skills of our students determine the level of their success in school and throughout their lives. If our students do not learn to read in their early years, they cannot read to learn in their later years. Academic learning depends upon one's literacy skills. In other words, the ability to read is the foundation—and the predictor—of a child's success, not just as a student but as a citizen.

While literacy is the responsibility of the entire education community—from the school board to the superintendent, to the principal, to the classroom teacher, to the librarian, to the paraeducator providing one-on-one services, to the counselor assisting students select their courses—I caution against legislative language that mandates attaching literacy outcomes to a superintendent's job performance. In part, the multiple variables that will determine district outcomes make it an unfair element of the superintendent's evaluation, and, perhaps more importantly, it requires an inordinate amount of data collection to reach a definitive conclusion about a single administrator's performance. Our professional educators need to focus on providing direct instruction in this critical area, not spend their time with data collection.

The field of literacy is dynamic and continues to evolve with new discoveries in neuroscience, psychology, and the specific cognitive science of learning. Our colleges and universities that prepare teachers are engaged in the ongoing development of this important field. The accreditation of teacher preparation programs is the responsibility of the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators, so it is certainly appropriate for legislators to request that the Standards Board review teacher preparation programs through the lens of literacy instruction. As the former chair of the Standards Board, I can assure you that the preparation programs are under regular review.

The Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators is also the body which determines the standards and requirements for teacher licensure in the State of Vermont. It appears that the intent of this legislation is to request that the Standards Board review the standards for licensure, particularly in the endorsement areas of

Special Education, and to add coursework that specifically addresses literacy. As a graduate of UVM's teacher preparation program in the 1980s, I was required to have six credit hours in reading before receiving my teaching credentials in Secondary English. The endorsement as a Reading Specialist required an additional 18 credit hours.

We agree with your premise that it is unfair and ineffective to expect Special Educators to teach reading if they have not been trained to teach reading.

I do not know how many public tax dollars were spent in hiring the District Management Group in 2017, but many of us in the field of reading could have provided you with the same conclusions this private consulting firm provided; in the 1990s, we saw a dramatic and documented reduction of special education referrals in schools that implemented Reading Recovery in first grade. If we do not provide effective reading instruction to struggling readers—which is what Reading Recovery and other one-on-one programs do—then they will most likely be diagnosed with a learning disability and placed on an IEP, something that can be avoided with proper intervention and direct literacy instruction in the early grades.

If there is one thing that we learned through the painful years of No Child Left Behind's test-and-punish approach, it's that students do not learn how to read by being forced to take standardized tests. Educators know that the standardized tests you reference in this bill do nothing in assessing an individual student's needs; they are designed to assess an entire district's program of learning and should not be the focus of a teacher's time and energy. Teachers need the time and resources to qualitatively assess their students individually to determine what instructional approaches will work best. Standardized tests have a narrow focus on a very small set of skills, and we must analyze the results cautiously. As former Vermont Commissioner of Education Marc Hull used to say, administering a standardized test is the equivalent of checking your engine's oil level with a dipstick. It is only one measure that cannot assess the entire engine's performance.

To be even more specific, I want to go on record as requesting that you strike lines 19 and 20 on page 2, and lines 1 and 2 on page 3. All Vermonters are aware of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of all ages, but we need to avoid dramatic statements that imply this pandemic has damaged students' development to the point that they will suffer for years to come. I appreciate the concern expressed in this type of statement, but we must acknowledge the resilience of our children and youth as well as respect our educators' ability to help their students heal from the pandemic and to complete the unfinished learning of the last year. Statements of this nature do not acknowledge, respect nor appreciate the tireless efforts of Vermont educators, as well as the efforts of our students' families, in providing the best education possible to their students during this wretched pandemic. Whether meeting their students in-person or engaging with them virtually, educators have been doing their best in addressing all academic areas, including reading and writing.

Educators need time and resources to continue to assess their students and determine their needs for future instruction. Our educators report that they have been amazed at how much their students are learning through the pandemic, particularly in the area of executive functioning skills like time management and personal initiative. We must be extremely careful to avoid any punitive measures for students and their families as we work collectively to prepare our students for new opportunities and possibilities.

We ask that you reconsider the demands this legislation would place on school districts and the children they serve. While assessment of pre-K and kindergarten students is important, many reading experts argue that a standardized assessment should not be administered at those young ages.

I would also caution against the use of the term dyslexia, implying that it is a specific diagnosis. Dyslexia is a term used to describe a multitude of learning disorders that a struggling reader may experience while acquiring literacy skills. All effective interventions must be tailored for each student's individual needs; this takes time, as well as a sophisticated skill set on the part of the teacher.

In closing, I will return to my opening remarks. We appreciate and respect your Committee's focus on student literacy, a complex issue which requires ongoing study, ongoing professional development for the field, and ongoing resources to support our efforts in making sure every Vermont student is a strong reader.

Thank you. I am happy to answer your questions.