



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION  
MEMO  
From the Desk of Jay Nichols

To: Senate Education  
Date: February 9, 2021

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this issue. Before I jump into the specifics of the draft bill, I want to make a quick statement. I've spent most of my career advocating for strong early childhood education, this is primary because of the social emotional strategies schools can provide to help students with executive functioning and self-regulation. Additionally, I've been a proponent of early education because it has demonstrated significant and measurable statistical gains in students school readiness assessments and has also been correlated with end of third grade reading achievement progress. It is my belief that one of the best ways to improve reading outcomes for students is to provide all 4 year old's in Vermont an early kindergarten full-day program. Many countries and some states already provide for this. If our goal is to improve reading achievement of students this is one statewide systematic approach we can take.

Now specifically to the bill at hand, first, I am a strong proponent of the changes in instructional practices that I believe are much more likely to occur with successful implementation of Act 173. This law to me is not a special education law as much as it is an "every student" educational law. So let me comment on each part of the bill quickly.

I agree with the findings section of the bill. We need to improve the literacy skills of our students. This instruction needs to formally begin with early kindergarten and continue through third grade with every student having access to the time and support they need to be independent high functioning readers. In essence, the ability to be an independent functioning reader at the end of third grade must be the constant. The amount of time a student needs, the different instructional approaches a student might need, the resources and interventions a student might need - those all must become the variables. Again, the constant must be that all students are independent functioning readers by the end of third grade. In education, we traditionally say that in the early grades students are learning to read. After third grade they are reading to learn. Students that are significantly below reading grade level at the end of third grade often spend the rest of their academic careers trying to catch up. And the gap in reading ability between them and their peers generally widens. Students significantly below grade level at the end of third grade are 90% more likely to drop out of school without a high school diploma than students who are on grade level at the end of third grade.

We do need to remember that although the findings in the bill mention learning loss to the pandemic - our students are likely in a much better place comparatively to other states. This is because, on average, our students have received much more in-person instruction than schools in other states because our state has done a much better job of mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 virus than other states. We should all be thankful for that. I was recently talking to my counterpart in another state who told me most of their schools have had NO in person instruction since last March.

I do think that it is time for every school board to have a specific policy on literacy if they do not have one already. That policy needs to focus on identifying struggling students and requiring that necessary resources are used by the system to provide whatever is needed to ensure all students are where they need to be in reading skills by the end of third grade. Working with the Vermont School Board's Association and the Agency of Education a policy can be developed that:

- Implements benchmarks. I also have no problem with reporting to the AOE via Lexile scores or any other agreed upon method that is consistent across the state.
- Ensures a process for identifying struggling readers early and to make it clear that they will provide necessary

interventions for students that struggle regardless of why they struggle. I would not single out dyslexia as school districts should be responding to any reading issues. All reading issues should be addressed through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports that will include everything from first instruction to special education services requiring an Individualized Education Plan

- Requiring school systems to report out on student literacy results is fine. However, when schools report out it should be with a growth focus. The idea has to be all around growth. Yes, we want all students at a certain level but we want all students progressing too.
- However, in terms of the School Superintendent's evaluation, I do not think that should be tied to student literacy outcomes. First of all, there is very little research that even supports this for a classroom teacher who does have a lot of impact on students literacy growth in his or her class. I do not think any one person should be held accountable for literacy scores. There is a research-based synthesis of education that looks currently at over 1000 meta-analysis of instructional strategies and practices. One of the top rated effective practices is a concept called Collective Efficacy. In short, this term means that all educators believe that they have the collective responsibility to do whatever they need to do to support all students. They work together to provide all students with what they need. Superintendents are key in this work. Principals are even more key within the individual school. And, of course, the teachers themselves working together professionally toward a common goal is the lynchpin for success. Additionally, gimmicks such as this make it even harder to attract outstanding superintendent candidates to our poorer districts. These districts across the country, and in VT, have lower performance in terms of literacy and mathematics on average. We should be looking at ways to incentivize superintendents, principals, and teachers to work in these districts with lesser resources instead of the other way around which is essentially what we do in our public education system today.

Lastly, in terms of teacher preparation programs, I think having the Agency of Education reviewing these programs especially with an eye to reading instruction training is a good idea. We often hear that our elementary teachers know how to teach reading. But that is not always the case. Many of our teachers can implement a program, or the curriculum

in literacy that they are asked to teach, but they may not really understand the fundamentals of reading that are necessary to be able to teach all students how to read. It has been my experience that in the areas of phonics and phonemic awareness many of our elementary teachers are inadequately trained. The better trained our teachers are in providing high quality reading instruction to all students they better our children will perform in reading.