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Testimony on Senate Bill - DR20-0807 pertaining to literacy

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted By: Marjorie Y. Lipson, Ph.D.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss proposed legislation. I am Marjorie Lipson, Professor Emerita, University of Vermont. My area of professional expertise is literacy – specifically reading and reading difficulties, with a special focus on grades K-6. I have written several textbooks on the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties and on the teaching of reading broadly. I have conducted research on, and supported professional development in, the teaching of reading for decades. Over the past 20 years, I have worked extensively with teachers and educational leaders on whole school improvement in Vermont schools. Before I started my academic career, I taught in urban and bilingual schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Washington, D. C.

I testified last week on a bill being considered by the House Education Committee and I testified there last year regarding an earlier bill. Although, there are substantial differences in the two bills being discussed, they are both responding to a desire to support the implementation of 2018 Acts and Resolves No. 173. Given the level of detail in my previous testimony, I would ask your permission to link the remarks (and references) I provided last week into my comments on this Senate bill so that I can limit my comments here to the specific content of the Senate bill.

Testimony:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/WorkGroups/House%20Education/Bills/H.101/Witness%20Documents/H.101~Marjorie%20Lipson~Literacy%20Support%20Testimony%20~2-9-2021.pdf>.]

References:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/WorkGroups/House%20Education/Bills/H.101/Witness%20Documents/H.101~Marjorie%20Lipson~References%20and%20Resources%20to%20Support%20Early%20Reading%20Difficulties~2-9-2021.pdf>

The bill you are entertaining proposes to: (1) provide grants to supervisory unions and school districts to train teachers in methods of teaching literacy; (2) create a new Literacy Division within the Agency of Education responsible for improving prekindergarten through grade 12 literacy within the State; and (3) require the Agency of Education to review teacher preparation programs and report to the General Assembly on to what extent these programs prepare teacher candidates to use science-based literacy materials and programs.

1. Like this committee, I am concerned that so many students in Vermont are not achieving high levels of literacy. However, I am very concerned about the training teachers in the absence of a comprehensive and systemic approach. In my previous testimony, I spoke to several key components of any effort to improve:

- a. **educator expertise** – in both literacy and the complexities of teaching diverse groups of students in varying settings.
 - b. I also spoke directly to the importance of creating **effective systems** for support teacher expertise – systems that included high-quality and **useful assessments**.
 - c. Finally, I spoke about the importance of **sustainability**. It does no good to get efforts started and then switch to another one the next year. Thoughtful, committed teachers and administrators feel as though they are constantly facing a new demand every time they turn around.
2. While I, and others, would welcome enhanced literacy expertise at the Agency level, the resources to create and sustain a new division would likely be prohibitive. I would like to suggest, instead, that you consider how to develop and support regional centers of excellence and/or other methods for developing capacity – which I will return to in a moment.
3. The Agency of Education already regularly reviews teacher preparation programs through its accreditation process. They can, and do, expect that these teacher preparation programs reflect the most current and research-based information. The term “science-based literacy materials and programs” is likely meant to be a term of art rather than a general expectation that the information taught is valid and comprehensive....
 - a. As a practical matter, when conducted in other states, this has generally involved some sort of “syllabus review.” Looking to see what the syllabi (and or textbooks) say about the content of teaching. This is a slippery slope. Simply listing it in the syllabus is no guarantee that it is taught. Nor is the absence of a specific “word, phrase, or program” indication that the important content is *not* taught. The process used in Vermont is much more extensive than that and involves looking at “outcomes” (the knowledge and skills of those graduated) vs. “inputs.”
 - b. The state through its accreditation processes, its legislation, and its policy has already set standards and expectations that are extensive and specific. I am concerned about the statements in the current legislative proposal that focus on “using science based literacy materials and programs.” There is current interest in the “Science of Reading.” I recently did a webinar at the request of the International Literacy Association. In it, we talked about the importance of considering **all of the science**. We do, indeed, know much more today about the reading process than we ever had before. There is a critical need to teach phonics to those students who need it. But, it’s not enough. Teaching reading involves much more than that. There is much less “science” about how to teach reading to diverse students in complex contexts. Orchestrating the multiple aspects of reading is a challenge. What we do know is that there are several evidence-based approaches to early reading that meet the standard established by What Works Clearinghouse. We also know that teaching all students the same content, the same way, can have deleterious effects – not just on students who struggle, but on those who do not.
 - c. As a result, one of the most critical features of an effective system is the ability on the part of those closest to it to make good decisions about both individual and groups of students.

What would I like to see? There are several things that I would like this committee to consider.

1. Focus grant activity on asking districts to develop coordinated, coherent plans and approaches that unite the various policy and legislative efforts already launched. We have a good base here in Vermont.
2. Ask districts and partnerships to demonstrate how their work is systemic and likely to be sustained over time.
3. Recognize that early literacy instruction, no matter how robust, is not enough to ensure that all students will be able to meet challenging standards of literacy in grades 4-12.
4. Support thoughtful decision-making that includes multiple sources of information and a careful plan for analyzing and using data.
5. Understand and support the long-term acquisition of teaching expertise. How will we develop and support the capacity for the type of specialist knowledge that is required to support the most vulnerable students and to coach all teachers?

None of these issues is amenable to a quick fix and I concur with Ms. Carmolli's comments in this regard. Thank you, again for your attention and concern for literacy.

Respectfully submitted,
Marjorie Lipson