
AOE Follow Up Testimony: Literacy, DR 21-0807

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Ted Fisher, Director of Communications and Legislative Affairs

Date: February 5, 2021

Comments on DR 21-0807

The Vermont Agency of Education is very supportive of this language and grateful to the committee for considering it. We understand that the Committee has been in conversations with other stakeholders, heard feedback on the proposed language, as well as additional policy ideas. We welcome a robust and thoughtful conversation on this important issue and would be delighted to consider additional policy ideas in this area.

We conceive of the proposal before you as part of a much larger policy conversation about solutions to improve literacy outcomes for Vermont students, particularly in the early grades. We recognize and agree with the assertion of some of the other stakeholders you have heard from, that this is not a problem that can be solved by legislation alone. Improving literacy will require a focused, coordinated effort, across multiple areas, including in assessment, improving practice, educator professional development, systems coherence / capacity, regulation and law.

AOE is increasingly focused on the importance of creating and sustaining coherent, strong school systems at the local level. In our Vermont framework of local control over the vast majority of education delivery, much is dependent on the success and capacity of our local school districts and supervisory unions, ensuring that we have strong local systems is critical to equitable and consistent outcomes statewide. As you have heard, school districts face different conditions and challenges across the state, and their capacity to attend to critical issues like literacy varies as well. We believe that the legislative proposal before you is a reasonable measure in the context of the broader effort, to ensure that districts are, rightly attentive to this important issue.

Regarding the requirement for a school district policy and a new element of superintendent evaluation, the Agency conceives of this policy solution in the following conceptual framework:

- 1) The Vermont constitution holds the state responsible for educational outcomes, yet the state delegates significant responsibility to local school districts. Under statute, superintendents are CEOs of school districts or supervisory unions; we assert that it is reasonable for the SU board to examine, as one element of a comprehensive superintendent evaluation, whether the SU and member districts are making progress on the goals for student literacy outcomes. The Agency is not advocating that superintendents should be evaluated on student outcomes alone, or that the state should dictate all facets of a supervisory union's evaluation of the superintendent. However, we do see value in adding accountability for progress on literacy outcomes to this important policy tool – the superintendent evaluation.

- 2) To the question about what the districts goals are, and what the implications for individual superintendent evaluations are, it is up to the school board to decide goals and their performance implications. With responsibility for education split between state and local jurisdictions as outlined above, this is the board's role, and the flexibility this provides will allow districts to develop a literacy approach that is responsive to local needs and conditions.
- 3) With responsibility split, but the state is still ultimately responsible, we need to ensure SUs are monitoring for student outcomes on a regular basis, not just waiting for state SBAC reports, in this context, a common data point that can be easily reported and is comparable across systems is very useful. Current benchmark assessments in use by the field have the capability to report results in [Lexiles](#), which is one reason the Agency recommends use of this metric, which is widely used nationally.
- 4) We agree that literacy is foundational to the educational experience and is worthy of special focus when evaluating organizational performance.