

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Executive Director
DATE: February 24, 2021
RE: Literacy – Drafting Request 21-0807 Draft 4.1

Thank you for allowing me to discuss with you your literacy initiative. I am Jeff Fannon, the executive director of Vermont-NEA, and as you can well imagine, literacy is important to Vermont-NEA’s members. I appreciate you taking up this critical issue. To be brief, we support the direction in which the Committee is moving, but I do have some modest suggestions that I outline below.

I will start, however, with some general literacy observations and then make some comments about the draft legislation. Vermont-NEA has on staff a director of professional development, Julie Longchamp, PhD., who oversees all of our professional development (“PD”) for our members. (She is also a National Board Certified Teacher—“NBCT” that we can talk about some other time.) Under Dr. Longchamp’s direction, Vermont-NEA has become the state’s most trusted provider of professional development for educators—teachers and para-educators. In addition to training members under Vermont-NEA’s umbrella, we also contract with many school districts to provide PD to school employees. Among the many offerings, we engage a great deal with members about literacy instruction because Vermont-NEA members know the importance of literacy to a student’s success.

As we’ve all heard, academic study after academic study supports the idea of having a highly qualified and trained teacher as being the most critical factor in student success. And while merely because a teacher is on a provisional teaching license does not necessarily mean she isn’t a great teacher, it is worth noting that today there are 132 special education teachers working under a provisional license. Many of these special education teachers work providing literacy instruction to the students most struggling with reading. Dr. Longchamp is working with several of these provisionally licensed teachers through the peer review process.

In conclusion of my introductory remarks, as Don Tinney testified to before your committee on February 4th, himself a 31-year teacher holding a K-12 reading specialist endorsement, teachers assess their students’ reading skills regularly. Teachers, in collaboration with their peers, need the time and resources to create an individual profile for each struggling student that then includes a targeted intervention for that particular student. In other words, data must be gathered about each student before a solution can be mapped out. Standardized tests don’t do this labor-intensive work, but teachers assess and create focused interventions regularly, if they have the time and resources to do this necessary literacy work. I believe the draft legislation is headed in that direction.

Section 5 of the draft legislation should include Vermont-NEA among the organizations with whom the AOE must collaborate. Teachers' voices must be included in the discussion to "develop a state-wide vision for literacy..." Likewise, for section 6, Vermont-NEA and teachers should be included. Moreover, the section should include creation for a process to create an individual student profile for each struggling student so that interventions are not unfocused or a waste of time. By way of suggestion, I believe a new subsection 5 should read as follows:

(5) how educators develop an individualized profile for each struggling student.

Section 7(a) should be revised because the Standards Board for Professional Educators, (the "Standards Board") is the body that determines the standards and requirements for accrediting teacher preparation programs. At a minimum, therefore, the Standards Board and the AOE should assess these programs not the AOE exclusively.

Finally, I agree with Chelsea Myers'/VSA's proposed language changes to section 7(b) that were shared with the Committee today. Her reasoning is sound, and we support the proposed change.