

Dear Senate Committee on Education,

We all agree that teacher training is important for improving Vermont literacy outcomes. But teacher training is only one component for legislating effective change! Literacy improvement depends on three areas :

1. Screening in pre-kindergarten through second grade for markers of dyslexia (S.75).
2. Use of curriculum based on structured literacy which includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension as recommended by the National Reading Panel, and
3. Providing teacher preparation and professional development training in structured literacy with the knowledge and practice standards for teaching reading.

Improving Vermont's literacy needs all three components. Literacy success for the bottom third of Vermont's children, in particular, depends on all three components.

We rely on the same "experts" who keep recommending the same instructional methods. More teacher training in using the same methods will not solve this problem. Or as Mary Lundeen would say, "We need a system change."

Please watch this five minute House Education Committee testimony. The link starts at time = 18:40 (listen until 23:45): In responding to a question from Representative James, Mary Lundeen agrees that students with reading difficulties need "a structured literacy approach and teachers need to be taught how to do that." All students benefit from reading instruction using structured literacy.

Part of the problem is that everyone is using the same language (reading is not innate, phonemic awareness, phonics, Science of Reading, etc.). But the devil is in the details. Are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension taught in context as a child "reads" (balanced or leveled literacy)? Or are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension being taught directly in a systematic sequential way (structured literacy)?

So while Mary Lundeen is talking about teaching phonemic awareness and phonics using structured literacy, Kate McCawley is concerned about assessing these "skills in isolation". Kate McCawley stated that Essex Westford School District is using Running Records as an assessment for the Winter kindergarten session. This assessment is Not recommended by the National Council on Teacher Quality (p. 6) because it relies "on the three-cueing system of reading words, a method that is not supported by consensus research." Please see Emily Hanford's APM report, "At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers."

The Education Committees are in the best position to direct improvements in Vermont's literacy. The three components are critical to overcoming the lack of direct instruction resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Vermont must adapt the best teaching practices to help low-income, minority and special education students overcome the disproportionate effects of the pandemic.

Please let us know how we can help move this important first component -- screening legislation (some version of S.75) - forward.

Thank you.

Cindy and Mack Gardner-Morse