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Testimony for the Vermont Senate Education Committee Regarding S.75

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Thank you, Senators, for inviting us to speak today about S.75, an act relating to screening students for dyslexia. I would like to explain the importance of this bill and its positive impact on screening and instruction.

This marks my 25th year working in Vermont schools as a teacher and administrator. Over this time I served many children and teens who could hardly read. This was not obvious at first. The students were insightful and eloquent, but when asked to read aloud or to explain what they had read, they could not. Sometimes they would start crying. Other times they admitted, "I don't understand what I read." This drove me to dive deep into reading research and enroll in The Reading Institute, at Bay Path University, and pursue the Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction, despite having already completed a doctorate in education at UVM and a Fulbright Scholarship.

S.75 is extremely important for Vermont's students and schools. Screening students for the markers of dyslexia using evidence-based tools, such as those recommended in *The Four Pillars of Reading Success: An Action Guide for States*,¹ published last June by the National Council on Teacher Quality, will not only identify and benefit students with dyslexia, but also students who are below proficient and need effective instruction.

¹ National Council on Teacher Quality. (2020). *The Four Pillars of Reading Success: An Action Guide for States*.

As stated in S.75, these markers include phonological deficits, including difficulty with recognizing and manipulating speech sounds, retrieving words, and rhyming. Markers of dyslexia also include difficulties with reading and spelling words. From first grade through high school, screening also targets reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency.

S.75 stipulates “evidence-based methods,” that “consist of specialized reading, writing, and spelling instruction that is multisensory.” Evidence-based is the gold standard of research, in which independent experts conduct a rigorous, objective, and scientific review to verify the research methods and outcomes. Students with the markers of dyslexia will receive direct and systematic instruction that is cumulative, so they practice their increasing knowledge and skills over time to attain grade-level literacy. S.75 rightly articulates that, “Each step is built on those steps previously learned.” On this foundation, students with the markers of dyslexia will receive appropriate education before or if they fall behind. S.75 lists the key evidence-based methods of instruction. These include:

1. Phonological awareness is the metacognitive awareness of the English speech-sound system fundamental for literacy. Students distinguish subtle sound differences, like short *i* and short *e* – /ɪ/, /ě/ – and become agile in phoneme manipulation, such as, ***pit to pet, pet to bet, bet to bat, bat to mat, mat to mash.*** Students learn to recognize and create their own rhymes – ***nickel, pickle, tickle,*** and alliteration – ***three, throw, through.*** For some students, this comes automatically. Other students need the evidence-based instruction described in

S.75 to achieve this early level of automaticity and master the 44 speech sounds produced by the 26 letters of our alphabet.

2. Sound-symbol association: 50% of the English language is spelled by direct sound-symbol correspondence and “another 36% can be spelled accurately except for one speech sound (usually a vowel),”² such as the word **said**. Students with markers of dyslexia especially struggle with spelling. Here S.75 will make a substantial improvement in their learning.
3. Syllable structure: Our English language of over 600,000 words have only six syllable types. When poor readers are directly taught to recognize each type, such the silent-e syllable (**dome, fame**) and the consonant-le syllable (**steeple, uncle**), they gain a very powerful strategy for reading words correctly.
4. Morphology: When students learn morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning in words, their vocabulary and comprehension grows exponentially. Students with the markers of dyslexia need the direct instruction in which they learn that, for example:

The prefix **con-** in consensus means, “with.”

The root **-struct** in construct means “build.”

The suffix **-tion** in nation means, “the act or condition of.”

²Moats, L. C. and Tolman, C. (2009). English gets a bad rap!. *Reading Rockets*. [https://www.readingrockets.org/article/english-gets-bad-rap#:~:text=Approximately%2050%20percent%20of%20all,sound%20\(usually%20a%20vowel\).](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/english-gets-bad-rap#:~:text=Approximately%2050%20percent%20of%20all,sound%20(usually%20a%20vowel).)

With direct instruction in morphology, including our Anglo-Saxon bases, Latin roots, and Greek forms, students dramatically increase their vocabulary and thereby improve their comprehension. They learn to create word webs, and experience how words move from noun to verb to adjective to adverb, as in **dog, to dog, dogged, doggedly**.

5. Syntax: Syntax is the rule system of English sentence structure. Knowing vocabulary is not enough, poor understanding and use of syntax is another marker of dyslexia. Syntax instruction improves reading comprehension and writing, especially moving up through the grades when text becomes more complex.
6. Semantics: Lastly, semantics is the meaning of words within a context. For example, “Bat the ball!” is very different in meaning than, “The actor batted her eyelashes.” Semantic instruction is essential to educate students with the markers of dyslexia. This includes vocabulary, inferencing, and making meaning of text.

Another benefit of S.75 is early screening and instruction. Students’ brains absorb the foundations of English from kindergarten to second grade like no other time. You’ve probably all heard how natural and easy it is for children this age to pick up other languages. After a short time immersed in another country, they can chat up a storm. The same phenomenon happens in our English language. For students without dyslexia markers, the brain needs only 1 to 4

exposures to learn new and spell words,³ but struggling students may need 12-20 instructional exposures to achieve the same learning.⁴

Like evidence-based instruction, screening and assessments must be scientifically validated and reliable. This means other evidence-based assessments arrive at the same results. An unreliable screener only measures progress in a reading program, with results that do not correspond with external measures. In contrast, in my graduate program at The Reading Institute, I assessed students with the LETRS Reading and Spelling Screener and the Gallistel-Ellis Reading and Spelling Screener. The results were identical, and I, as a teacher, found what the students already knew and what I needed to teach.

In grades K through 2, we want to ensure that the structure of English becomes accurately mapped in the brain. When you can automatically say, read, write, and spell a word, then the word has been permanently mapped. You will never forget the word. Upon sight, you cannot unsee the word. With ease, you can include the word while writing. Your eyes are the conduit for the four parts of the brain, developed to form robust neural connections,⁵ working in microseconds to access the meaning stored. It's why your brain instantly knows the difference between **receive** and **receipt**. This recognition is automatic, unconscious, and actually delightful. All students deserve instruction to master the skills that all literate adults take for granted and use every day.

³ Kilpatrick and O'Brien. (2019). Effective prevention for word-level reading. In D. A. Kilpatrick, R. M. Joshi, & R. K. Wagner (Eds.), *Reading Development and Difficulties*. Springer. P. 187.

⁴ McKowen, M., Beck, I.L., & Sandora, C. (2012). Direct and rich vocabulary instruction needs to start early. In J. F. Baumann & E. J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice*. Guilford.

⁵ Dehaene, S. (2010). *Reading in the Brain*. Penguin.

Language learned is neurologically mapped in the brain, including errors. It can take weeks to months of intensive remediation to correct these errors. This is expensive and time-consuming, and may require students to miss other school activities. But the research is clear. “Accommodations and modifications are never a substitute for remediation.”⁶ Students with severe reading deficits may need up to two hours of daily reading instruction, prioritized over other subjects,⁷ because “[r]eading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends.”⁸ When students are provided structured-literacy instruction, over time S.75 will greatly reduce the need for remediation.

S.75 will lead schools to identify students who have not made grade-level progress on the components of language instruction. For students who come to school with limited vocabulary and background knowledge, this instruction is the difference between success and failure. Many children from low-income families, children of color, and especially ELL students depend on this direct instruction to master standard written English. S.75 will also identify often-overlooked dyslexic students, those with strong oral language skills who compensate in the lower grades, but then struggle in 3rd or 4th grade, when the amount and complexity of text increase.

S.75 screens all children in the fall of kindergarten and first grade, catching them before they fail. Any student in the spring of grades K through 3, who doesn’t meet grade-level literacy

⁶ Dickman, et. al. (2002). *Response to OSEP Summit on Learning Disabilities*. The International Dyslexia Association. P. 25.

⁷ Birsh, J. R., Shedler, J., & Singer, R. A. (2018). Designing the learning environment and planning multisensory literacy lessons. In J. R. Birsh & S. Carreker (Eds.), *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills*. Brookes. P. 703.

⁸ Moats, L. C. (2020). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do, 2020*. American Federation of Teachers. P. 20

standards, will be assessed again and provided the evidence-based instruction needed to advance learning, during class and through interventions. S.75 also provides screening for all students, K through 12, who exhibit the markers of dyslexia. Think of all the middle and high school students with who struggle due to limited vocabulary and poor spelling, reading fluency, and comprehension skills. S.75 opens the door to the evidence-based instruction they need to progress in literacy and be best prepared to join Vermont's workforce, especially in much-needed areas that require strong literacy skills, such as health care and technology. We know the detrimental, lifelong consequences of low literacy on individuals, families, our state, and country. S.75 can give our students what they need **now**.

S.75 stipulates that schools send annual notification about required K–3 screenings, and the opportunity for parents to request a screening in any grade. Schools also notify parents when their children are in need of evidence-based instruction and interventions. Schools will provide information and resources about the markers of dyslexia. In this way, they can partner together to advance students' literacy levels. In K–2, parents and schools can make the most of these critical years of language development. In all grades, parents will learn about the evidence-based methods of instruction their children will receive.

In closing, by leading and supporting the passage of S.75, many more students will learn to read who otherwise would have been missed, from the foundational years through high school. Research shows that 95% of students learn to read when provided evidence-based structured-language instruction.⁹ Ultimately S.75 will result in enormous cost-savings, reduce

⁹ Moats, L. C. (2020). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*, 2020. American Federation of Teachers. P. 5

the number of students in special education, increase our high school and college graduation rates, and equip Vermont youth with the 21st century literacy skills needed for success. Over the course of the coronavirus pandemic and reduced educational programs, the time for S.75 has never been greater. S.75 will make huge inroads in teaching all students to read proficiently. Thank you so much for your support of our students and schools.

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed. D. has served as a teacher and principal for 25 years in Vermont's K–12 public schools. As a Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic secondary education in Germany. She has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, raised funds for Vermont schools, and currently serves on the Board of Directors of several organizations, including the New Hampshire International Dyslexia Association. Dr. Dorfman is pursuing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at The Reading Institute of Bay Path University.