



Testimony Provided to: Senate Education Committee
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Topic: Literacy Instruction in Vermont
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Over the last several years, the Vermont legislature has heard from a number of stakeholders, including experts, about literacy instruction and what we need to do to address struggling learners. The Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA) agrees that we must improve instructional practice to ensure that all learners are able to read, and that schools have the necessary interventions to support struggling learners. VCSEA also recognizes that school districts across the state are in different stages of MTSS development and implementation due to financial constraints and resources. A robust MTSS is necessary for successful implementation of Act 173.

MTSS Implementation:

Act 173 requires that all school districts "...develop and maintain a tiered system of academic and behavioral supports for the purpose of providing all students with the opportunity to succeed or to be challenged in the general education environment." Effective MTSS implementation focuses on five essential components: a systemic and comprehensive approach; high quality instruction and intervention; comprehensive assessment; effective collaboration; and expertise. Both the DMG report and the AOE MTSS Field Guide point to these as the necessary shifts in order to make significant change in our schools. Districts will need direct, sustained focus on developing their multi-tiered systems. The literacy bills in their current draft form could provide needed financial support for the kind of deep, comprehensive learning that will be required for systems change. This broad lens is essential to ensure that schools have lasting capacity to teach all children to read, identify those learners who require additional support and provide high quality interventions.

We understand that the committee has received compelling testimony in support of legislation to require specific screening tools for the learning disability dyslexia. VCSEA believes there will be unintended consequences in requiring schools to conduct bi-annual dyslexia screenings in K-2 and as requested in K-12. This concern stems primarily from the risk in narrowly focusing on a single measure for a single type of disability at the expense of a broad, comprehensive assessment system that will identify all learners who struggle, including those struggling with dyslexia. If time, energy and financial resources are spent on a single, narrow tool, it draws attention and resources away from the more comprehensive change needed in schools in order to realize the promise of Act 173 and improve reading abilities for Vermont students.

VCSEA does not support requiring school districts to use a dyslexia screener for students K-12 for the following reasons:

1. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Vermont Special Education Rules and Regulations already require school districts to identify students who may have an IDEA-eligible disability through our ChildFind requirements.
2. There is little research to support the effectiveness of a dyslexia screening tool:¹
 - a. Screeners have an extremely high rate of “false positives” - some studies point to a 50-60% error rate
 - b. Identifying all struggling readers as possibly having dyslexia masks the true problem with literacy instruction: a lack of effective, expert reading instruction for all learners.
 - c. Screening instruments are inherently inconsistent across schools, resulting in very limited predictive validity.
 - d. There is no direct positive relationship between screening assessments and reading outcomes
3. Screening instruments do not provide diagnostic or instructional information as to why the student is underperforming. Without information to inform instruction, educators cannot take action on behalf of the student.
4. Screenings and benchmark assessments are already a part of a comprehensive assessment system within MTSS.
5. Districts must focus on developing the system rather than focusing narrowly on one content area.

VCSEA Recommendations:

VCSEA offers the following recommendations to support this important work:

1. Invest in building teacher expertise. Good first instruction is the hallmark of an effective MTSS, and it requires an expert classroom teacher. Training classroom teachers in literacy and math will lead to improved outcomes for all students. As it relates to literacy, VCSEA agrees that K-2 teachers must develop expertise in teaching the foundational skills of literacy (phonological awareness and phonemic awareness) as part of a comprehensive literacy program.
2. Provide Districts with professional development money to develop and fully implement a robust MTSS. Solid instruction and solid assessment will allow schools to identify struggling learners. Administrators and teachers must have a deep understanding of the systemic changes that need to occur to ensure that all students will learn at high levels.

¹ **Four Dyslexia Screening Myths That Cause More Harm than Good in Preventing Reading Failure and What You Can Do Instead**

VanDerHeyden, Amanda M.; Burns, Matthew K.
Communique, v45 n7 p1, 26, 28 May 2017