

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Education Committee  
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Executive Director, Vermont-NEA  
DATE: January 31, 2024  
RE: S.204 - Literacy Bill

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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you about S.204, the literacy bill. We share your intention to ensure that every Vermont student knows how to read and improves their reading competencies. We have significant concerns with the bill but if you think it necessary, we believe the bill needs to be amended to make sure it doesn't conflict with state polices and federal laws, to ensure it doesn't create redundancies in the school delivery system, and assure it doesn't impinge on teachers' ability to teach all students how to read. You may see some similarities and consistencies with the AOE's Jess DeCarolis's testimony, which reflects an appreciation for her work in this area.

Education research is an ongoing process, and the profession continues to be informed by teachers in the field and neuroscientists in their laboratories as to what is the most effective teaching for all readers, and it is ever evolving, as it should be. This focus on reading is a robust debate in the profession, and educators already continuously improve their practices based on solid research, but we do not want to become beholden to one particular instructional practice because it happens to be politically popular or touted by the press. For example, in 2007 the United Kingdom went down the reading road contemplated by some here now, but a recent academic examination of the results do not make a compelling case for adopting a phonics only approach to teaching reading.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, that paper calls for scrapping the phonics approach adopted in 2007 for a more comprehensive alternative approach to teaching reading. While Vermont educators are informed by the research in the teaching of phonics, they are most effective when they take a comprehensive and flexible approach to literacy instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Jeffrey S. Bowers, University of Bristol, "Reconsidering the evidence that systematic phonics is more effective than alternative methods of reading instruction" [phonics-educational-psychology-review-in-press-1.pdf](https://www.bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/files/2024/01/phonics-educational-psychology-review-in-press-1.pdf) ([bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com](https://www.bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/files/2024/01/phonics-educational-psychology-review-in-press-1.pdf)).

Jess DeCarolis's January 19 written testimony is compelling and worthy of a re-read. Among other recommendations, she also stressed the importance of reviewing the good work the Act 28 Advisory Council on Literacy accomplished and its recommendations.<sup>2</sup> The Council is comprised of, among others, teachers who work in classrooms every day with students who present with a myriad of challenges and success when it comes to reading. Teachers are the experts, and

while they certainly can advance their craft, they teach our students with much success as compared to other states who adopted a one-size fits all only approach. For example, you heard about Mississippi's success with the NAEP scores of its 4<sup>th</sup> graders; however, the scores there are suspect for two reasons. First, Mississippi retains 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at a very high rate and provides significant resources to these early readers, which is good for their reading scores but may have social emotional scars for students who "failed" 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Second, the NAEP scores touted as demonstrating Mississippi's reading success in 4<sup>th</sup> grade drop significantly by 8<sup>th</sup> grade—Vermont was in the top 5 states and Mississippi dropped to third from last. In other words, Mississippi's success was fleeting. Looking at the states that scored well throughout, Massachusetts and New Jersey, it is worth noting that they do not mandate a one-size only approach to reading.

What teachers say they need most to teach all readers is flexibility. I heard that repeatedly and it makes sense. Each student brings different strengths to the classroom. Every student is different, and different learners require different pathways to reading proficiency. Teachers need flexibility and the resources to meet every child's unique needs, and requiring a single approach for all students will necessarily fail some students.

The science of teaching students to read is based on a large body of research that contains five interrelated components. All students need explicit instruction in the five essential components of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.<sup>3</sup> While the bill mentions these five

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<sup>2</sup> See December 22, 2023 Report of the Advisory Council on Literacy.

<sup>3</sup> National Reading Panel. (2002), "Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications."

[nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf](https://nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf).

components, S.204 places too much emphasis on one aspect of the research, phonics, while minimizing the importance of others; however, the interconnectedness and interdependence of all of the essential components cannot be overstated. That singular focus may harm certain students who may excel with different approaches to teaching them to read.

If you move forward with the bill, Vermont-NEA recommends you adopt the amendments to the bill that Jess DeCarolus outlined in her testimony. Additionally, Vermont-NEA believes the bill should include specific mention and ongoing appropriation for the AOE Act 28 literacy project manager position. Previously, I sat in this chair and criticized the Agency for shortcomings, but I want to be clear, given resources, as was the case with the Act 28 literacy position, the Agency has served a vital role for literacy specialists, special educators, and regular education classroom teachers throughout Vermont. Please maintain your support for that position.

Another general recommendation would be to increase resources for the AOE and school districts with which to collect literacy data. Locally obtained data guides curriculum development and instruction, thus making data a needed evidentiary resource for schools. The AOE and local education leaders need to be given resources to figure out a way to make local assessments valid and reliable for the state to utilize.

At section 1(d) [proposed 16 VSA § 2907(d)] the bill proposes to add a new statewide end-of-year: “assessment through statewide end-of-year assessments, shall be given intensive general education reading intervention immediately following the identification of the reading deficiency.” Despite what the testing companies claim, statewide standardized tests are designed to assess a district’s academic program, not to reach conclusions about individual students. Using a standardized, statewide assessment to identify a reading deficiency in individual students lacks the efficacy of an assessment conducted by a trained classroom teacher.

At section 1(e) [proposed 16 VSA § 2907(e)] the bill proposes to ban a specific instructional strategy and remove from the professional teacher’s reading arsenal a

tool. That is exactly the type of directive teachers are saying they do not need or want. The flexibility to meet every student's needs is critical to teachers being able to succeed with students. Moreover, our position as to this specific issue is consistent with Vermont-NEA's long-held position that curriculum matters should not be the subject of legislative action.