

Testimony on S.204: An act relating to reading assessment and intervention sponsored by Senator Martine Gulick

Senate Committee on Education

January 16, 2023

Stefanie M. Waite

Introduction

My name is Stefanie Waite and I'm an educator in private practice since 2020 doing comprehensive evaluations and tutoring children who struggle with reading and written language. Prior to the pandemic, I worked for 23 years at the Stern Center for Language in Learning in Williston, a nonprofit education organization that provides direct services to students and delivers evidence-based professional development for teachers.

K-3: a critical time for children

I believe that the bill sponsored by Senator Gulick has the potential to improve reading outcomes for all Vermont children. It may also validate what many Vermont teachers know to be true: that the most effective way to establish strong reading skills in the early grades is to build on the skills most children bring with them to kindergarten—oral language—and to link those skills explicitly to print. The most effective way to do this is to deliver evidence-based teaching strategies to *all* children beginning in kindergarten and to use universal screening to identify which children are at risk for difficulties with the foundational skills required for reading. I believe it's time for Vermont to join the 41 other states with laws requiring universal screening in the earliest grades.

NAEP results in Vermont: Dismal and declining

Over the past four decades, research has provided overwhelming evidence that the most effective way to establish strong reading skills in the early grades is to use an explicit structured literacy approach that links speech to print (Yoncheva, Wise, & McCandliss, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017). You don't need access to educational research journals for proof that change is needed in Vermont's K-3 classrooms. Mainstream media outlets, including Vermont's own *Seven Days* newspaper and *Vermont Digger* have published articles within the past four months highlighting our dismal reading performance (Novak, 2023; D'Auria, 2023). In 2022, 71% of 8th graders tested in Vermont scored below a "proficient" level, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as the "Nation's Report Card." Fourth graders didn't fare much better—with 68% of them scoring below proficient. Even

more alarming, in my view, is that only 9% of Vermont 4th graders scored in the “Advanced” level, and this percentage has not changed in more than 20 years.

Surely, we can do better.

Critics

Critics who might push back against this type of legislation worry about the risk of labeling children as young as 5 and 6 years old. As a parent of three children, I understand this worry and agree this is a legitimate concern, but one that should not derail the bill because the goal of universal screening is not to label children but to find those who are at-risk for reading difficulties and give them the targeted, explicit instruction they require when it matters most: in the earliest grades. We know that when reading difficulties go unnoticed in the early grades, children are much more likely to struggle with reading throughout school, putting them at risk for mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, as well as increasing their chances of ending up in poverty and being incarcerated. Children who aren’t reading on grade level by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school (Wexler, 2019, p. 8).

Other critics might lament the amount of time we’ll expect classroom teachers in the lowest grades to focus on things that sound boring or old-fashioned—sounds, letters, phonics, decoding...yet these are the skills that researchers have found over and over again are most helpful in turning children into readers. Some critics will also complain that precious instructional time will be spent on basic, seemingly low-level skills rather than spending time with incredible books and fostering a love of stories in children by allowing them the freedom to choose their own books to read quietly on their own. No teacher or parent I have ever known would deny that reading aloud to children of any age is not only a delightful way to spend time but is essential to building vocabulary, fostering imagination and creativity, and exposing children to the rich language of literature. But using instructional time every day for silent reading is *not* effective in the youngest grades. One small example to illustrate this is from a 7-year-old who once shared with me how much he dreaded silent reading time. Not only did he not know how to read (he was diagnosed with dyslexia by the end of second grade), but he knew that his teacher thought he could read because he could memorize short books and “read” them to her. During silent reading time, Carter sat with his book and counted the words over and over until he heard someone else turn a page, and then he turned his page, too. He did this word counting exercise until silent reading time

ended, and he felt more and more stupid as the year dragged on....[he eventually got the instruction he needed, learned how to read, and published his own books] (WCAX, 2019).

Closing Thoughts

For too long, we have failed our children when it comes to literacy—for too long we have ignored signs that ineffective teaching methods based on disproven methodologies have led our children in the wrong direction, and it shows in the growing number of Vermont children who read poorly. Vermont children and the educators who care about them deserve better. Bold action in the form of legislation like this can give our children a chance to develop the strong reading skills they deserve. I believe that Vermont urgently needs this legislation. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts here today.

References:

- D’Auria, P. (2023). In education secretary search, a new issue rises to the surface: reading. Retrieved from: <https://vtdigger.org/2023/10/09/in-education-secretary-search-a-new-issue-rises-to-the-surface-reading/>
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2022). The NAEP reading achievement levels by grade. Retrieved from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/states/scores/?grade=4/>
- Novak, A. (2023). Too many Vermont kids struggle to read. What went wrong—and can educators reverse a yearslong slide in literacy? Retrieved from: <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/news/too-many-vermont-kids-struggle-to-read-what-went-wrong-and-can-educators-reverse-a-yearslong-slide-in-literacy-39237031>
- Seidenberg, M. (2017). *Language at the speed of sight: How we read, why so many can’t, and what can be done about it*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- WCAX. (2019). Vermont 4th grader writes book to raise awareness about dyslexia. <https://www.wcax.com/content/news/Fourth-grader-writes-book-raising-awareness-about-dyslexia--563773381.html>
- Wexler, N. (2019). *The knowledge gap: The hidden cause of America’s broken education system—and how to fix it*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.
- Yoncheva, Y., Wise, J. & McCandliss, B. (2015). Hemispheric specialization for visual words is shaped by attention to sublexical units during initial learning. *Brain and Language*, 23-33.