

S.303 An act relating to supporting Vermont's young readers

Testimony to Senate Education February 13, 2023

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The Department of Libraries is supportive of S.303 as it relates to extending the Advisory Council on Literacy through June 30, 2027.

This Council is charged with advising the Secretary of Education on improvements to “proficiency outcomes in literacy for students in prekindergarten through grade 12 and how to sustain those outcomes” (p. 7).

Given the key role that public libraries play in supporting pre-literacy, the Department respectfully requests that the State Librarian or their designee be added to the Council's ex officio membership.

Our hope is that adding the State Librarian or their designee to the Advisory Council on Literacy will enable the Department to be part of the conversation about a holistic approach to literacy that starts as soon as a child is born – with a public library card. Our hope is that by serving on the council, we can increase focus on the great work that is happening now in public libraries and develop even better supports to help children in obtain pre-literacy skills they need to succeed when they begin their formal education in preschool or kindergarten. We want to help Vermont's kids be even more ready for school and are excited to lend a hand to this effort.

Public libraries support children and their caregivers from the day of their birth and serve as children's first point of contact with literacy learning. Public libraries provide instruction and support for parents, guardians, and caregivers to assist them in fostering pre-literacy skills that are essential to student's reading success in school.

Because preschool storytimes are a long-established tradition in public libraries, we can sometimes lose sight of the benefits of these programs for parents, caregivers, and children. While storytimes may appear to be a fun social activity or even a source of entertainment, they serve as a key entry point into pre-literacy learning.

Through weekly storytimes at public libraries, adults are introduced to best practices that support children as they take their first steps on the path to literacy through singing, talking, reading, writing, and playing.

When parents attend storytime with their kids, they receive training that helps them support their kids in developing a strong foundation of pre-literacy and school readiness skills.

Pre-literacy is what children learn about reading and writing before they formally learn to read and write. Being read to or told stories is linked with a child's success in learning to read. The more a child is read to, the more they are exposed to language, the better their reading

outcomes will be. It is vitally important that we read to kids – and that we start that activity as soon as they are born.

That said, having access to books isn't sufficient to growing strong readers. In addition to having access to books, it is important that parents and caregivers learn *how* to read to kids. That's where our public libraries come in.

Many new parents lack training in raising successful readers. Board books and picture books have faded in their memories along with the songs and nursery rhymes they learned when they were growing up. Many parents have gotten out of the practice of reading, and many lack confidence in reading children's books aloud. Many parents feel silly singing and moving to the rhythm of music and the written word with their kids. But those songs, rhymes, and stories are essential and foundational building blocks upon which early literacy is built and are key elements in raising successful readers.

At storytime, librarians demonstrate how much fun it is for families to read together. Librarians model reading, singing, playing, and learning together. Parents and caregivers gain confidence in their abilities to serve as their children's first teachers by attending storytime programs weekly at their local library. They make friends with other families that attend and form supportive communities focused on literacy and learning.

Through library storytime programs, parents and caregivers learn songs and rhymes that they can then share with their children all throughout the week. This practice reinforces the meter and cadence of language and helps prepare children to break down and decode words when they get to elementary school. The repetition of words helps children to learn to pronounce syllables and break down words into smaller parts – and there's a link between practicing these skills with kids in a fun and engaging way and their future academic success.

Library storytime programs support our youngest learners in growing their pre-literacy skills, including:

- Print motivation and readiness,
- Phonological awareness,
- Vocabulary,
- Narrative skills,
- Print awareness, and
- Letter and number knowledge.

Libraries can support children at different phases in their development as pre-readers through storytimes geared toward developmental groups from birth through preschool. For example, the focus of library programs for infants is immersive experience and introduces babies to the rhythm of the language through song, rhyme, bouncing, and gentle rhythmic tapping. In a toddler-focused storytime, activities to support phonological awareness, typically move into an articulation-focused realm as the toddlers develop the ability to repeat syllables, words and

then sentences. In a toddler program, librarians lead children in singing simple songs, clapping, dancing, and performing hand gestures in a rhythmic manner, and ask kids open-ended questions about the book they're read. Finally, a preschool storytimes might include more advanced skills and introduce more complex language, ideas, rhythms, and melodies. Through the series of literacy programs, kids learn to listen to stories and talk about what they've learned. These emergent narrative skills are linked with reading comprehension skills that evolve they'll need to become successful readers.

For many kids in Vermont, who don't have access to preschool, storytime is their first "classroom" experience. Library programs are free and open to everyone, so help to ensure that no kids are left behind.

Access to children's literature is another key piece of storytime programming. Adults who attend storytime gain familiarity with books appropriate to their children's reading and developmental level. They enter a community of other caregivers and children who engage in reading together, meeting week after week.

The books librarians select for their storytimes are geared toward the attention spans, interests, and developmental level of the kids in the learning cohort. Families that attend storytime will naturally browse library collections with their kids - selecting great picture books and board books to bring home.

Families that have a regular practice of going to their local public library for storytime have access to hundreds of free books that they can enjoy at home. While home libraries are important, no home library can compare to the variety and diversity of books found at a public library. Developing a routine of visiting the library as a family also helps kids to associate learning with fun and enjoyment.

All of that said, the Department has heard from public librarians that they would appreciate more support in learning to integrate science-based approach to literacy into their regular literacy programs, and we are rising to that challenge.

The Department has a long-standing relationship with the Vermont Early Literacy Initiative, which is now housed at Vermont Humanities. Through a grant from the Department, a cohort of 15-20 public librarians engage in a year-long immersive learning experience led by VELI to enhance their understanding of the science of reading and how to implement storytime programs to better support emerging readers.

We plan to continue the VELI partnership, and are also working to build more supports for children's librarians in our state. This spring, we'll be offering a series of workshops for all youth librarians in the state to jump-start this initiative in Vermont. Librarians who attend the workshop will learn how to plan storytimes to support families even more - and how to provide parents with plain-English instruction in the principles of early childhood literacy. The continuing education courses will provide librarians who serve youth with opportunities to learn the

science of reading so that they can infuse their regular programs for youth with more activities to support early childhood literacy.

The Department is very interested in helping Vermont's youngest learners get ready to read – and we're really excited about building out these continuing education opportunities. And of course, we will continue to support *all* students in their grade school, middle, school, and high school years through engaged programs at libraries and with access to reading materials. The Department administers a statewide summer reading program each year and supports public libraries in implementing that program locally with promotional materials and a modest programming grant. And of course, we continue to encourage reading through our support of the states three book awards for youth.

p.5, line 12

"Sec. 8. 16 V.S.A. § 2903a is amended to read:

13 § 2903a. ADVISORY COUNCIL ON LITERACY

(a) Creation. There is created the Advisory Council on Literacy. The Council shall advise the Agency of Education, the State Board of Education, and the General Assembly on how to improve proficiency outcomes in literacy for students in prekindergarten through grade 12 and how to sustain those 18 outcomes.

(b) Membership. The Council shall be composed of the following ~~16~~ **18** ~~19~~ members:

(1) ~~eight~~ **nine** members who shall serve as ex officio members:

(A) the Secretary of Education or designee;

(B) a member of the Standards Board for Professional Educators who is knowledgeable in licensing requirements for teaching literacy, appointed by the Standards Board;

(C) the Executive Director of the Vermont Superintendents Association or designee;

(D) the Executive Director of the Vermont School Boards & Association or designee;

(E) the Executive Director of the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators or designee;

(F) the Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association or designee;

(G) the Executive Director of the Vermont Independent Schools Association or designee; **and**

(H) the Executive Director of the Vermont-National Education Association or designee; **and**

(I) the State Librarian or designee;