



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date: February 14, 2024

Subject: **S.303**

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director the Vermont Principals' Association. In full disclosure, I have not had the opportunity to talk to any principals about this bill with the exception of new principals that I was working with today. I would like the opportunity to discuss the bill more thoroughly with the committee if it looks like the bill is something that is likely to move through the legislative process. I can put out a survey to members, query the field in our weekly drop in meetings, and discuss this with our Executive Council that serves as the governing body of our organization. None of those things have occurred yet, as I wasn't aware of the need for this testimony until late yesterday. So -these are clearly my thoughts as the Executive Director of the VPA but do not necessarily constitute a position from our association.

That said, I'm glad to share my initial thoughts with you today.

First, I do agree that our reading scores should be better. I will remind the committee that one of the strongest levers we have to improve reading scores and overall literacy skills is to offer free publicly available prekindergarten for all children and that the VPA has been on the record advocating for this for several years now and all of the research supports this need. Getting children into the system, in public schools or with private partners that provide high quality licensed early childhood educators is one of the very best things we can do to improve student performance especially in literacy.

In the K-12 construct, research clearly shows that the quality of the teacher is the most important variable that the school system has any control over in relation to student literacy growth. This was first widely acknowledged in Marzano's seminal work, Classroom Instruction That Works and has since been supported by a variety of educational research including John Hattie's Visible Learning which currently serves as the bible of instructional impact for schools.

It's important to note that reading research is a dynamic field, and new findings continue to emerge. Researchers are increasingly considering the intersection of traditional literacy with digital literacy, which is becoming more relevant in the 21st century. Additionally, research on reading continues to inform educational practices and policies to improve literacy rates worldwide. Reading development typically progresses through stages, starting with basic decoding skills (phonics) and advancing to fluency and comprehension. Each stage builds upon the previous one.

In terms of the language in this bill here are my specific thoughts at this time, again with the caveat that this is only coming from my initial perspective without talking to leaders in the field:

#### Section 1:

No disagreement here. There are lingering instructional strategies that do not comport with what modern reading instruction research has demonstrated is best practice today. And, of course, we agree literacy, especially in the early grades, is the most critical academic learning we need to ensure. In the first few years of formal education nothing is more important than students learning to read. As a superintendent, I used to say to our staff that early literacy instruction is about learning to read and after third grade or so students begin reading to learn. Students who are not fairly independent readers by the end of third grade face an uphill battle in all academic areas moving forward.

#### Section 2:

I suspect this is the section of the bill that is likely to have the greatest amount of disagreement from the field. It appears from my quick reading of the bill that each licensed educator would need to complete essentially a three credit course worth of online module learning (45 hours). Given the myriad of responsibilities already on educators some will ask if this is really necessary or appropriate. Does our school's guidance counselor, AP level science teacher, or high school physical education teacher need to take this course? How will it assist them in their key teaching requirements? What about our high school principal who has a myriad of other responsibilities, will they too be required to take these literacy modules? Currently, to move from a Level 1 educator license to a Level 2 license an individual needs 90 hours (6 credits) of qualified professional learning. Will the professional positions listed above qualify for movement when potentially half of their professional learning doesn't relate directly to their day to day job responsibilities? If teachers are going to be required to go through this process, who will pay for

it? Are schools expected to give up what essentially amounts to 7 inservice days to meet this new mandate?

Section 3:

I don't have a problem with this from a conceptual point of view. However, the devil is in the details. I think we need to be mindful of redundancy and not requiring positions to partake in professional learning that isn't connected to their work in any real way. For example, having guidance counselors at the middle school level understand fundamentals of reading instruction could be important AND having them skilled and updated on the latest strategies for supporting students in a crisis situation is much more important to that particular job classification.

Section 4:

VPA is fully supportive of the Agency of Education submitting recommendations to the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators on how best to strengthen educator prep program's teaching of evidence-based literacy practices. Furthermore, given that the Agency may or may not have the necessary skilled individuals to provide these recommendations absent strong assistance from the field, we strongly recommend that the Advisory Council on Literacy (section 5 of this bill) work closely with the AOE on these recommendations

Section 5:

An ongoing Advisory Council on Literacy is something that I testified in favor of when discussing S.204 earlier this session. There is no more important academic work in our schools and providing an Advisory Council on Literacy to support the Agency of Education, the General Assembly, and the field at large is a great idea.

Respectfully submitted,

Jay Nichols