

## Advisory Council on Literacy Update

**Testimony To:** Senate Education Committee on Education

**Respectfully Submitted by:** Gwen Carmolli, Chair, Advisory Council on Literacy

**Date:** January 9, 2024

Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Advisory Council on Literacy (Council). I serve as Chair for representing Vermont Curriculum Leaders (VTCLA), with a background in elementary education, and leadership in instruction, data and curriculum, graduating from University of Vermont, Saint Michael's College, Harvard University, and Vermont Leadership Institute.

The Council is deeply committed to improving literacy achievement for all Vermont students. The goal of the Council is to increase literacy outcomes for all students in grades PreK - grade 12 students and close achievement gaps for historically marginalized students. The hope is to build lifelong skills and enjoyment of literacy.

### Recommendations

**(General Assembly) Provide funding to support literacy improvement efforts, in order to:**

- **Maintain the Act 28 Project Management literacy position at the AOE** - the position has been invaluable in accelerating resource development and school system supports
- **Support the development of resources and accountability measures (by the AOE)** - these resources are guiding school system shifts in curriculum, instruction and assessment
- **Maintain the Advisory Council on Literacy** - the Council is monitoring progress, reviewing research and evidence resources, and building consensus that is resulting in shifts in school systems/schools.

**(Vermont Agency of Education) Continue to develop resources to support implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction, assessment and necessary supports on:**

- Stages of literacy (including both reading and writing) development, including early literacy
- Evidence-based instructional practices and assessment in reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and morphology, highlighting evidence-based practices aligned to science of reading (SOR) research and Structured Literacy
- Evidence-based assessment and instructional practices in writing
- Statewide expectations for literacy curriculum and instructional practices, including prioritized standards and effective instructional practices
- Evidence-based literacy programs and assessments
- Specific screening and assessment tools that support needs-based literacy instruction and intervention
- Highly effective instructional practices that promote equity and cultural diversity
- Strategies to address staffing challenges
- Training/teacher preparation in evidence-based literacy, instruction, assessment and intervention
- Accountability measures to monitor use of research and evidence-based programs, practices and or assessments

Recommendations were developed using an input and consensus building process. Recommendations were voted on in November 2023, with full support of the Council.

### Council Background

In May 2021 the state passed [Act 28 of 2021](#) Section 5 (Act 28), an act related to improving prekindergarten through grade 12 literacy within the State of Vermont. The act acknowledged the continuous work to improve

literacy outcomes, and provided funding and support for efforts to improve and sustain literacy outcomes. The Act provided funds for professional development, a position at the Agency of Education, technical assistance and support for supervisory unions to implement evidence-based literacy approaches, a review of teacher preparation and re-licensure, and established an Advisory Council on Literacy with a set of tasks in order to advise the Agency of Education, State Board of Education, and the General Assembly on how to improve and sustain literacy outcomes in prekindergarten through grade 12.

| Task  | Progress  |
|---|---|
| Review literacy assessments and outcomes, and provide recommendations to continuously improve and sustain literacy improvements   | Completed by the Council annually 2021, 2022, 2023              |
| Provide recommendations on updates for Section 2903 of Title 16 (16 V.S.A. §2903), and support implementation and maintenance of the statewide literacy plan  | Completed by the Council 2022                                   |
| Provide recommendations for services to school districts on the implementation of the statewide literacy plan, and staffing needs at the Agency of Education to provide school districts' supports                    | Completed by the Council 2023                                   |
| Provide recommendations for collecting literacy-related data that informs instructional practices, teacher professional development, and literacy assessments   | Task for the Council Spring 2024                                |
| Provided recommendations for best practices in literacy instruction for tiers 1, 2, and 3, within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to improve and sustain literacy proficiency                                 | Completed by the AOE as resources, reviewed by the Council 2023 |
| Submit a written report to the House and Senate Committees on Education on or before December 15 of each year, with findings, recommendations for legislative action, and progress toward the outcomes outlined above | Completed by the Council annually 2021, 2022, 2023              |

### Assessment Results

Vermont implemented a new statewide assessment for literacy, Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VTCAP) in spring of 2023. Results are not yet available, so the Council reviewed assessment results from 2022. Results showed trends of overall low achievement and a large achievement gap for students experiencing poverty.

| SBAC 2022   | NAEP 2022   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 44% of students in grades 3-9 met proficiency in English Language Arts</li> <li>● Vermont scores declines 4 points from 2021 to 2022</li> <li>● Scores ranges from 41% (grade 3) to 46% (grades 5 and 7)</li> <li>● No data available for historically marginalized student groups (poverty, race, ethnicity, and disability)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Vermont scored 1 point above the national average</li> <li>● Vermont scores declined 5 points from 2019 to 2022</li> <li>● 34% of grade 4 students met proficiency - 38% Below, 28% Basic, 24% Proficient, 9% Advanced</li> <li>● 34% of grade 8 students met proficiency - 27% Below, 38% Basic, 30% Proficient, 4% Advanced</li> <li>● Achievement gap for students in poverty - 19% Proficient</li> <li>● Limited data on racial sub-groups - data not reported because reporting standards were not met</li> </ul> |

Statewide assessment results demonstrate overall low literacy achievement and a decline in scores, results that will have an impact on learning throughout school and beyond. With 50% of third grade students failing to meet state standards in literacy, the state’s commitment to improving literacy outcomes is critical.

**Evidence-Based Instructional Practices**

Evidence-based practices are highly effective literacy strategies and interventions that are based on scientific research and meta-analyses for teaching foundational skills and comprehension, and supporting students who struggle with literacy learning.

The evidence is consistent and clear: explicit and systematic instruction on code-based and comprehension-based reading skills, and needs-based support are the most effective literacy practices for the early grades. A strong focus is needed on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension for all students, and needs-based tiers and layers of support are critical for struggling learners. The following is a summary of the recommended evidence-based practices for foundational skills, comprehension, and intervention/needs-based support.

| <b>Foundational Skills</b>  | <b>Comprehension</b>   | <b>Struggling Readers: RTI &amp; Multi-Tier Intervention</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.</li> <li>2. Develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters.</li> <li>3. Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.</li> <li>4. Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.<br/>(Tier 1)</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies.</li> <li>2. Teach students to identify and use the text’s organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content.</li> <li>3. Guide students through focused, high-quality discussion on the meaning of text.</li> <li>4. Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development.</li> <li>5. Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension.<br/>(Tier 1)</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year. (Tier 1)</li> <li>2. Provide time for differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students’ current reading level. (Tier 1)</li> <li>3. Provide intensive, systematic instruction on up to three foundational reading skills in small groups to students who score below the benchmark score on universal screening. (Tier 2)</li> <li>4. Monitor the progress of tier 2 students at least once a month. (Tier 2)</li> <li>5. Provide intensive instruction on a daily basis that promotes the development of the various components of reading proficiency to students who show minimal progress after reasonable time in tier 2 small group instruction (Tier 3).</li> </ol> |

**Work In Progress**

Since January 2022 a great deal of effort has taken place at the Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE) and in school systems across the state:

| <b>VT AOE</b>   | <b>School Systems</b>   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources on evidence-based instructional practices on AOE website</li> <li>• Vermont Literacy Blueprint Playbook</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy professional development on evidence-based instructional practices, literacy development and multi-tiered systems of support</li> </ul> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Online platform for professional development with 6 essential Literacy Learning Modules</li> <li>● Early Learning Network Community professional learning</li> <li>● Funding for Family Engagement Literacy Program</li> <li>● Funding for Vermont Framework for Proficiency</li> <li>● Professional learning and coaching on Effective Use of Local Assessment Data for educators to learn ways to use data to improve student learning.</li> <li>● Professional learning &amp; resources on data and lexile levels</li> <li>● Professional learning on Early Warning Systems on decision making for intervention and supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support for Advisory Council on Literacy</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review &amp; updates to literacy curriculum, instructional programs, and instructional materials aligned with evidence-based instructional practices - many school systems and schools are adding new programs (e.g., LETRS, Heggerty)</li> <li>● Development of instructional frameworks to outline evidence-based instructional practices and literacy supports</li> <li>● Update to systems of support aligned with VTmtss</li> <li>● Updates to data systems, including screening and benchmark assessments aligned with evidence-based practices and VTmtss (e.g., STAR Reading, iReady)</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

### Conclusion

There is widespread, shared effort to improve literacy instruction and achievement across Vermont. The Vermont Agency of Education, school systems and educators alike are working tremendously hard to increase literacy outcomes for all Vermont students. In order to continue this work, ***the Council recommends funding to support the efforts to increase literacy achievement for all Vermont students.***

Thank you for your support!

## ADDITIONAL TESTIMONY

### Comments on S.204

- S.204 as drafted requires follow-up assessment from an approved list from the AOE that would follow universal assessment for students in grades K-3 who are below universal benchmarks. In general it aligns with Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports (VTmtss), but it could be misinterpreted that this is dyslexia screening for all in the place of a universal screener. Universal screening is an important component of VTmtss, screening for skills and the ability to read and understand grade level complex text. A follow-up screening shows specific skills, but may not show the full breadth of literacy expectation for a grade level. To align with 16 V.S.A. § 2902, VTmtss, Act 173 it should be clarified in the bill and description that this is a bill to identify need for follow up assessment and identify need for intensive literacy intervention for struggling readers in grades K-3, with requirements for follow-up assessment from universal screening and supplemental intensive intervention, based on students' needs and progress.
- The bill as drafted describes a mandate of a specific literacy plan for students. Schools around the state have been putting systems of support and intervention systems, including plans, in place, so there should be better alignment with VTmtss to have flexibility in the name of the plan, in order to honor intervention plans that have already been developed. Students may already be on a plan such as an IEP, 504, or EST plan - an added literacy plan would mean a student could have multiple plans, duplicating effort for the same area of need. A more general planning system would align with VTmtss.
- The language of the bill should align with state and federal requirements for evidence-based instructional practices. Evidence-based resources (National Reading Panel, IES Practice Guides and CEEDAR Center/US Office Spec. Ed) cite "systematic and explicit" as evidence-based instructional practices. The language on page 8, line 2 should be updated to reflect, "systematic and explicit."
- Requiring a Reading Specialist for intensive intervention may be prohibitive for schools around the state. Some instructors (Title I teachers, Reading Teachers, Special Educators) provide intensive reading instruction, per their endorsement, but do not have a specific reading specialist certification. And, Act 173 created flexibility in who could provide intensive support. On page 8, line 9, the bill requires ("shall") intensive instruction from a reading specialist. To align with state endorsements and Act 173, I recommend removing this requirement or creating flexibility in the roles for the intensive intervention.
- With statewide requirements for literacy in Education Quality Standards (EQS), 16 V.S.A. § 2902, 16 V.S.A. § 2903, Act 173, and VTmtss, and recent shifts in special education I highly recommend a review for alignment with state and federal requirements.

## Comments on NAEP Results

While Vermont has shown a decline in scores from 2002 to 2022 (10 point decline in grade 4 reading, 8 point decline in grade 8 reading), it is important to note some specific information:

- **Vermont scores at or above the national average, and is one of the top states in both grade 4 and grade 8.** Vermont is at the state average in grade 4, scoring 7th in the nation in grade 4, and is above the state average in grade 8, scoring 6th in the nation.
- **Vermont shows achievement gaps for students in poverty, but the gap is smaller for students in grade 8** - Grade 4 shows a 25 point gap, grade 8 shows a 15 point gap.
- **Vermont does not have disaggregated data for racial subgroups in grade 4 due to unmet reporting standards. In grade 8 there is limited data due to unmet reporting standards for some racial subgroups.** Of the data available, there is a 4 point gap for Black students in grade 8.
- **The national average has declined from 2002 to 2022** - 1 point decline in grade 4, 5 point decline in grade 8

Proficiency on NAEP is reported at 4 achievement levels: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient & Advanced

- Grade 4 shows 39% Below Basic, 28% Basic, 24% Proficient, 9% Advanced
- Grade 8 shows 27% Below Basic, 38% Basic, 30% Proficient, 4% Advanced

**Basic** - partial mastery of the knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at a given grade.

**Proficient** - solid academic performance for the given grade level and competency over challenging subject matter including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

**Advanced** - mastery of both the NAEP Basic and NAEP Proficient levels and represents superior academic performance.

# Grade 4 Results

NAEP Proficient

## FOCAL JURISDICTION

|                 |    |
|-----------------|----|
| Nation (public) | 32 |
|-----------------|----|

## STATES/JURISDICTIONS WHERE PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE NAEP PROFICIENT IS HIGHER THAN THE NATION (PUBLIC)

|               |    |
|---------------|----|
| DoDEA         | 50 |
| Massachusetts | 43 |
| Florida       | 39 |
| Wyoming       | 38 |
| New Jersey    | 38 |
| Colorado      | 38 |
| New Hampshire | 37 |
| Utah          | 37 |

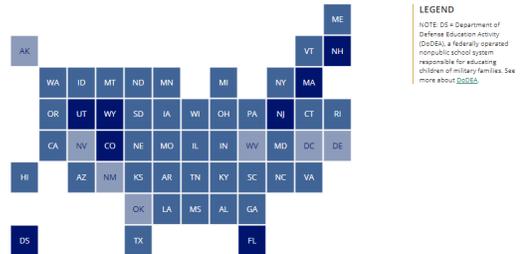
## STATES/JURISDICTIONS WHERE PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE NAEP PROFICIENT IS NOT SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT FROM THE NATION (PUBLIC)

|                |    |
|----------------|----|
| Hawaii         | 35 |
| Connecticut    | 35 |
| Ohio           | 35 |
| Nebraska       | 34 |
| Pennsylvania   | 34 |
| Rhode Island   | 34 |
| Montana        | 34 |
| Washington     | 34 |
| Vermont        | 34 |
| Illinois       | 33 |
| Iowa           | 33 |
| Indiana        | 33 |
| Wisconsin      | 33 |
| South Carolina | 32 |
| South Dakota   | 32 |
| North Carolina | 32 |
| Minnesota      | 32 |
| Idaho          | 32 |
| Virginia       | 32 |
| Georgia        | 32 |

|              |    |
|--------------|----|
| Arizona      | 31 |
| Kentucky     | 31 |
| North Dakota | 31 |
| California   | 31 |
| Mississippi  | 31 |
| Maryland     | 31 |
| Kansas       | 31 |
| Missouri     | 30 |
| Tennessee    | 30 |
| Texas        | 30 |
| Arkansas     | 30 |
| New York     | 30 |
| Maine        | 29 |
| Michigan     | 28 |
| Louisiana    | 28 |
| Alabama      | 28 |
| Oregon       | 28 |

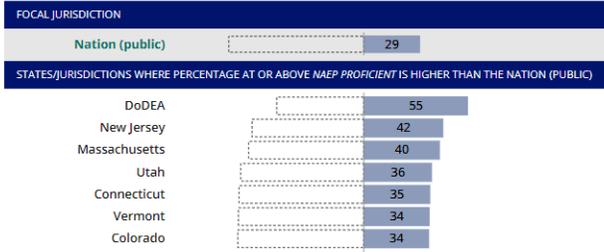
## STATES/JURISDICTIONS WHERE PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE NAEP PROFICIENT IS LOWER THAN THE NATION (PUBLIC)

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| Nevada               | 27 |
| District of Columbia | 26 |
| Delaware             | 25 |
| Alaska               | 24 |
| Oklahoma             | 24 |
| West Virginia        | 22 |
| New Mexico           | 21 |



# Grade 8 Results

NAEP Proficient



Defense federally school s; educatin families. DoDEA-1 level's an basis an interpret caution.

