

## Advisory Council on Literacy Update

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

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

**Date:** February 10, 2023

### 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 established funds for professional development on literacy, a position at the Agency of Education focused on literacy, technical assistance and support for supervisory unions to implement systems-wide evidence-based literacy approaches, a review of teacher preparation and re-licensure to ensure teachers have literacy instruction in training and re-licensure, and created an Advisory Council on Literacy 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.

Act 28 outlined a specific set of tasks and areas for recommendation for the Advisory Council on Literacy:

- Review literacy assessments and outcomes, and provide recommendations to continuously improve and sustain literacy improvements
- 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
- 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
- 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
- Provide recommendations for collecting literacy-related data that informs instructional practices, teacher professional development, and literacy assessments
- 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

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

### Overall Results

Data from the most recent SBAC assessment are not yet available, so the Council reviewed assessment results from the past 7 years. Historical results showed trends of overall low achievement and large achievement gaps for historically marginalized groups - a need to increase literacy outcomes for all students.

NAEP results showed:

- Vermont scored 3 points above the national average, but 16 points below the NAEP proficiency score
- Grade 4 students declined 8 points from 2015 to 2019
- Large achievement gaps for students with disabilities and students in poverty

SBAC results showed:

- 50% of grade 3 students met proficiency in English Language Arts
- Grade 3 students declined 2 points from 2018 to 2019
- Large achievement gaps for historically marginalized student groups (poverty, race, ethnicity, and disability) in every grade level
- Historically marginalized groups scored 24-30 percentage points lower than their peers
- Achievement gaps widen as the grade level increases

The statewide assessment results demonstrate overall low literacy achievement, large achievement gaps, 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.

### **Early Literacy Blueprint Review**

The focus of the Council's work for 2022 developing recommendations on the next revision of Vermont's early literacy plan, [\*A Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK Through Third Grade \(Blueprint\)\*](#).

The state early literacy plan is required as part of *Statute 2903 - Preventing early school failure; reading instruction (16 V.S.A. § 2903)*. This statute outlines the development and implementation of a plan for a comprehensive system of instruction and services in the first 3 grades, that is updated every 5 years. The original plan was submitted in 1998; the most recent plan was submitted in 2019.

The Blueprint is a guide for state and local policy makers and education leaders that develops a context for planning, policy development, and systemic implementation of state and local level literacy plans - in essence, it is the underpinning for planning and implementation. It provides an overview of research and evidence on systemic and instructional practices that will lead to improved literacy achievement for Vermont students. The current revision, adopted in 2019, was prepared by Research Making Change, with support from Vermont Agency of Education staff and an extensive stakeholder group. The following need and action steps are outlined in the plan:

Needs:

- To improve student literacy skills and achievement for each and every student in Vermont PreK through Grade 3
- To build capacity statewide to effectively support literacy development PreK through Grade 3 by designing and implementing appropriate early literacy learning experiences

Action Steps:

- To implement an Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services Plan
- To strengthen capacity to improve early literacy instruction and support

### **Recommendations**

The Council used a review process to develop recommendations for the next revision of the Blueprint. The recommendations were developed using a consensus building process, with a follow-up review to ensure alignment with statewide requirements and of evidence-based practices. The recommendations all meet alignment to the referenced statewide requirements, and to evidence-based practices. They were voted on in November and have the full support of the Council.

Overall, the Council found the Blueprint is comprehensive, aligned to statewide requirements, and reflective of evidence-based resources and practices. It was designed to be a policy guide for educational leaders that outlines the research, evidence and broad state and system-level practices. Furthermore, it was developed by a large group of statewide organizations and stakeholders.

The Council found areas within the plan that could strengthen it to improve usability, and to align with the most current

research and evidence.

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>Recognizes the critical role of early literacy instruction, assessment &amp; support in enabling all students meet literacy proficiency</p> <p>Includes representation from a wide array of stakeholders &amp; organizations</p> <p>Bases information on research &amp; evidence of effective instructional practices</p> <p>Provides a context for planning, policy development &amp; systemic implementation</p> <p>Includes 2 critical areas that lead to improved literacy outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Assessment</b> is a critical component of literacy instruction, MTSS &amp; systemic improvement</li> <li>● <b>MTSS</b> is a current initiative of the state &amp; a critical means to improving literacy outcomes</li> </ul>			
<p><b>Support Implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide resources on evidence-based instructional practices</li> <li>● Provide resources on a comprehensive system of assessment</li> <li>● Provides professional development resources and training opportunities on early literacy</li> </ul>	<p><b>Additions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Expand information about code-based &amp; meaning-based instruction</li> <li>● Include writing as a component of literacy</li> <li>● Expand information about evidence-based instructional practices</li> <li>● Expand the components of literacy</li> </ul>	<p><b>Changes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Remove “Balanced Literacy” Header</li> <li>● Change focus from struggling learner to all students</li> <li>● Update Balanced Literacy Section to describe comprehensive literacy instruction &amp; create an instructional guide</li> <li>● Remove “Learning Styles”</li> </ul>	<p><b>Additional Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide evidence-based resources prior to the blueprint revision</li> <li>● Develop a brief summary of the blueprint with links to resources</li> <li>● Develop an implementation plan for the next blueprint</li> <li>● Consider ways to support instruction beyond grade 3</li> </ul>
<p>Recommendations align with state requirements (Act 173, Act 28, 16 V.S.A. §2902, 16 V.S.A. §2903, Education Quality Standards) &amp; evidence-based instructional recommendations. Council members developed, reviewed and approved the recommendations.</p>			

As the Agency of Education indicated in recent Act 28 updates to the Senate Committee on Education, there is an incredible amount of focus and work on literacy happening across the state. School systems are working on instructional practices, assessments, multi-tiered systems of support, and more. The Agency of Education is developing literacy modules for teacher training, assessing teacher preparation programs, surveying school systems about literacy, developing a literacy playbook, and providing evidence-based resources. This collective efficacy is one of the highest evidence-based practices to improve achievement.

The Council’s recommendations for the next revision of the Blueprint include adjustments and additions that will require time and resources for the Agency of Education to research and develop, and funding to provide supports to school systems for implementation.

The Advisory Council on Literacy is heartened by the collective focus on literacy and appreciative of the current funding and support established by Act 28 - Vermont has the collective will to improve literacy outcomes. **The Council recommends continued funding to support the efforts to increase literacy achievement for all Vermont students.**

Thank you for your support, and for the opportunity to testify today!

