



TO: Senate Education Committee

FROM: Tamara Mount, Treasurer, Vermont Independent Schools Association

RE: Testimony on Literacy Plans for Independent Schools

DATE: February 29, 2024

I am Tamara Mount, the Head of School at Hilltop Montessori School in Brattleboro. I have been an educator for 20 years, including 11 years as the head of school here at Hilltop.

I am here today on behalf of the Vermont Independent Schools Association (VISA). I serve on VISA's Executive Committee and as the treasurer of the organization. VISA represents the interests of approximately 40 approved independent schools that are committed to providing high quality educational opportunities to meet the diverse needs of students across Vermont. We have a diverse membership, which includes historic town academies, an International Baccalaureate school, Montessori schools (such as my school), experiential learning programs, boarding schools, small elementary programs, ski academies, and highly specialized therapeutic schools that serve students with complex disabilities.

While VISA member schools each offer education programs that are uniquely adapted to the students they serve, all VISA member schools share the same core values of offering academic excellence with a commitment to promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within our schools. All member schools also have practices, pedagogies, and curricula that are culturally responsive, anti-racist, and affirming of individual identities.

As an educator working with children in the younger grades, I understand the importance of early intervention - this is a responsibility that we take seriously at my own school. Let me take a moment to give you a view into what's happening on the ground with literacy intervention and instruction in the independent school world, with Hilltop Montessori School as an example:

- We are a school with 120 students, 18 months old-Middle School, serving families in more than 15 towns in southern Vermont and beyond.
- All students receive Tier 1 literacy instruction, and those that need more receive Tier 2 instruction, that extra dose in smaller groups from our Learning Specialist Team.
- We have a system in place for our team of Learning Specialists to do assessments of all children's literacy skills from K-8th grade three times a year. We find that about 1/3rd of

our students benefit from additional direct instruction, beyond what our regular program provides.

- We work to identify those needs as early as possible, knowing that early intervention is critical and can provide the needed boost that some students need to be on track. Most students respond well to intervention and do not need the extra services of our Learning Specialist team after a year or two.
- We find that of those 30 or so students who need Tier 2 support, a few will not progress as expected at that time. And we look to the local supervisory union and Child Find (or families seek a private assessment) to provide a more thorough assessment to see if there is any additional information that could help us better understand the students learning style and needs. In most cases, the information confirms that we are on the right track, but might provide additional information to better meet the individual needs of the child.
- We provide Professional Development to all of our teachers, and have had a specific focus for literacy training and conferences in recent years. For example just this year we:
  - Sent six teachers to the three-day **Plain Talk for Literacy and Learning Conference**. *“Heralded as the nation’s premier Literacy institute. The Institute gained its reputation because of its clear focus on providing evidence-based reading research and strategies for those who teach all ages and grade levels.”*
  - Have supported four teachers in completing their Lexia LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) certification and had four more start the training.
  - We’ve included an attachment that details more examples of literacy Professional Development that we have done.

As an independent school, we have been able to respond proactively to many literacy challenges, and I know from my independent school colleagues that our school is not alone. We are able to identify and start focussed extra decoding instruction, or whatever specific skill is lagging, within just a few weeks of the start of school. Then later in the year, we can reevaluate and see if the student is responding to instruction.

VISA supports the committee’s efforts to improve literacy instruction in all schools - public and independent. We see the same challenges in our independent schools that our colleagues in the public school system are facing. We welcome the opportunity to be part of the solution to help improve literacy screening, intervention, and instruction. **VISA supports the adoption of grade-level appropriate school literacy plans and professional development for each of Vermont’s approved independent schools.** We recommend that such a requirement provide sufficient flexibility to appropriately reflect the diversity of our educational environments, the grade levels served, and the qualifications of our educators. Specifically, we support the addition of the following language to your literacy bill:

*On or before January 1, 2025, an approved independent school shall develop a grade-level appropriate school literacy plan that is informed by student needs and assessment data. The plan may include but not be limited to, identification of a literacy*

*vision, goals and priorities, measures and indicators, screening, assessment, instruction and intervention, progress monitoring, and professional development for all employed unlicensed teachers which may be differentiated by role and experience, and account for prior training. Professional development shall include explicit evidence-based literacy instruction where appropriate, based upon grade level, role, and experience. Teachers employed by an approved independent school shall complete a professional development program on or before January 1, 2027. Teachers hired by an approved independent school on or after January 1, 2026, shall complete a professional development program within one year of hire. An approved independent school shall maintain a record of completion of professional development consistent with this provision.*

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and thank you for your commitment to Vermont's students.

**Hilltop Montessori School**  
**Brattleboro, Vermont**  
**Past 10 years of Professional Development in Literacy**

**4 STAFF — David Kilpatrick Workshop (2019)**

*Phonemic Awareness and Fluent Word Recognition*

**4 STAFF — Lexia LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) completed with Proficiency (2021-2024) (4 additional staff have begun )**

- In-depth knowledge based on the most current research regarding what, when, and how much language skills need to be taught
- Ways to assess student language development for prevention and intervention
- Guidance on how to plan and balance word recognition and comprehension instruction
- Information on how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students

**5 STAFF - Reading League (2019 & 2023)**

*The **Reading League's** mission is to advance the understanding and use of evidence-aligned reading/literacy instruction through the science of reading. (Science of Reading “comes from outside disciplines outside of schools of education. e.g., neuroscience, linguistics, cognitive psychology, etc.)*

**2 STAFF - International Dyslexia Conference (2020 & 2021)**

*The International Dyslexia Association is a non-profit education and advocacy organization devoted to issues surrounding dyslexia.*

**6 STAFF - Plain Talk for Literacy and Learning (2024, 2019)**

*“Heralded as the nation’s premier Literacy institute. The Institute gained its reputation because of its clear focus on providing evidence-based reading research and strategies for those who teach all ages and grade levels.”*

**2 STAFF - Book Group with Author Dr. Melissa Lee Farrall (2024)**

- **Reading Assessment - Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition**

**2 STAFF - Wilson Certification (2018 - 2019)**

**2 STAFF - WRS Certified Teacher Conference (2021)**