

Testimony To: Senate Education Committee on Education

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

Date: April 1 2025

Topic: Support of S.15 from Advisory Council on Literacy

The Advisory Council on Literacy has been invited to provide testimony on S.15, a bill to amend statute 2903 to include supplemental literacy instruction for students below grade level. The Advisory Council on Literacy is pleased to provide support for S.15 with the following clarifications:

- Maintaining the focus of Act 139 as an early literacy law
- Updating language to reflect supplemental literacy instruction for students significantly below grade level

I serve as Chair of the Advisory Council on Literacy, a legislative council established by Act 28 of 2021 and Act 139 of 2024 to provide recommendations to the General Assembly, State Board of Education and Vermont Agency of Education on ways to increase literacy achievement for all Vermont students. This Council has reviewed evidence-based research, Vermont literacy requirements, and the input of members and their respective constituency groups to develop recommendations aimed at increasing literacy achievement. Many of these recommendations have been reflected in Act 139 and in literacy efforts at the Vermont Agency of Education.

Acts 28 and 139 were passed to support literacy efforts with particular focusing on the early grades - grades kindergarten through grade 3. Both laws were based on evidence-based research that outlines the need for explicit and systematic instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, and to provide requirements that provide needs-based intervention in these foundational skills. Instruction and intervention in the early years are critical in literacy development and put a student on track for future academic success.

Act 139, an act relating to supporting Vermont's young readers through evidence-based literacy instruction, outlines requirements in universal screening of early literacy skills, follow-up needs-based assessment and intervention, parental notification, and professional development for teachers in grades K-3 on universal screening, data driven decision making, and evidence-based literacy intervention. The law, as titled, is rooted in research and intervention for students in the early grades. It was enacted last spring and is being implemented in K-3 schools and classrooms across the state. Maintaining Act 139 is of critical importance to provide evidence-based intervention in the early years of literacy development.

Statute 2903, preventing early school failure; reading instruction, was updated based on Act 139 to summarize the requirements in the new law. Statute 2903 aligns with Act 139 by addressing early literacy instruction and intervention, and aligns with Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Support (statute

2902) by providing layers of support for struggling readers in the early grades. Unfortunately, some language from the previous version of statute 2903 was omitted, leaving out requirements for supplemental literacy instruction for students after grade 3; The previous version of the statute outlined requirements for grades K-3 and for grades 4-12. S.15 was proposed to amend the statute to restore the language that provided a requirement for the later grades.

Testimony on S.15 highlighted the importance of maintaining Act 139 to support early literacy efforts and to amend statute 2903 to provide support for students in grades 4-12. Jay Nichols and I provided advocacy for maintaining Act 139 in order to support the evidence-based early literacy practices and to support the positive work and implementation of the new literacy law. We offered support for S.15 with the maintenance of Act 139. Testimony by literacy advocates Dorinne Dorfman and Cynthia Gardner-Morse described the need to support struggling learners in grades beyond grade 3, and supported S.15 to provide needed requirements for students in grades 4-12. The collective testimony outlined needs to maintain the new early literacy law **and** address the needs of older students who are significantly below grade level. Though the testimony came from different perspectives, both aimed for the same outcome: increased achievement for all students.

At the suggestion of this committee, Jay, Cynthia, Dorinne and I met to work to understand the perspectives and to draft suggested language that would address maintaining Act 139 as an early literacy law and amending language in statute 2903 that would support students in grades 4-12. We agreed on the goal and developed a proposed language that addresses the perspectives that meet students' needs in grades K-3 and 4-12.

Our proposal offers language to address supplemental intervention for students significantly below grade level in grades 4-12 and supports the focus of Act 139 for students in grades K-3. We share the commitment to continue implementation efforts of the new early literacy law and to meet students' needs, regardless of grade.

Collectively, Cynthis, Dorinne, Jay and I, support Act 139 as enacted and propose amending statute 2903 with following changes:

On p. 1, line 10 - Add "significantly" in front of "below proficiency standards

"..instruction to any enrolled student whose reading proficiency falls **significantly** below proficiency standards for the student's grade level or whose reading proficiency prevents progress in schools."

On page 3, lines 8-16 - replace the language to reflect the following:

"In addition, public schools and approved independent schools that are eligible to receive public tuition for students in grades K-12 shall provide supplemental reading instruction to any enrolled student whose reading proficiency falls significantly below

proficiency standards for the student's grade level or whose reading proficiency prevents progress in school. Schools shall provide support and information to the parents and legal guardians."

Additionally, we propose that Act 139 maintains the focus on the early grades to provide the following to students in grades K-3:

- Evidence-aligned reading instruction in the classroom
- Annual screening on the 5 components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension)
- Supplemental reading instruction for students below proficient by a trained professional
- Parental notification if the student is significantly below

Finding common ground on complex issues can be a challenge. I thank this committee and my colleagues, Cynthia, Dorinne and Jay for working collaboratively to hear varied perspectives and consider a yes-yes solution to strengthen literacy achievement for all Vermont students.