

Testimony to Senate Committee on Education

S. 232: An act relating to public libraries and the Department of Libraries

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January 21, 2026

I appreciate the efforts of the bill's sponsors to raise awareness about the important role public libraries play in their communities, the important role the Department of Libraries (the Department) plays in supporting libraries across Vermont, and the tools public libraries need to serve their communities. This document includes feedback from the Department on each section included in the bill, as well as some additional suggestions.

I look forward to continuing the conversation in more detail as the session progresses.

Sec. 2. 1 V.S.A. § 379 VERMONT LIBRARIES DAY

p.3 lines 4-8

The Department supports the addition of Vermont Libraries Day to our calendars every October.

Sec. 3. 16 V.S.A. § 51 UNIVERSAL AFTERSCHOOL AND SUMMER SPECIAL FUND

p.3 line 9 – p.4 line 11

The Department is supportive of the idea that a reasonable portion of funds from the cannabis sales tax revenue be allotted to the Department of Libraries to support the Statewide Summer Reading Program and grants for afterschool activities in libraries. The Department notes that 16 V.S.A. § 51 seems to already include both municipal and incorporated public libraries as defined by 22 V.S.A. as eligible recipients. Currently, 16 V.S.A. § 51 reads:

(2) Cannabis sales tax revenue shall be used to support a mixed delivery system for afterschool and summer programming. Eligible recipients can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations.

That said, the Department feels that it would be beneficial to specifically include public libraries as recipients eligible for these funds, as public libraries are often overlooked in the sphere of afterschool and summer programming.

The Department is in favor of allocating funds from the cannabis sales tax revenue to support its annual Statewide Summer Reading Program and its summer reading grants to public libraries. The Department leveraged its annual distribution from the Smith Fund to award non-competitive grants of \$350 to 146 public libraries to support programming for youth in conjunction with their summer reading program in Summer 2025. Each grant

typically supports one or two summer programs for youth at a public library. An annual allocation from the cannabis sales tax would likely enable the Department to increase the amount of each summer reading grant award, thus magnifying the impact of this key support for summer reading in public libraries in our state.

The Department would welcome the opportunity to develop and implement a grant program to support afterschool activities for youth in public libraries. Such a program would increase the resources available to public libraries to perform this vital work.

The Department notes that the performance of Smith fund and its annual distribution to the Department has been inconsistent in recent years. An annual allocation from the cannabis sales tax would create a more consistent funding base for this important program, which supports students in maintaining their reading skills when school is not in session.

The Department has been participating in an ad hoc manner on the Afterschool and Summer Learning Advisory Committee and would welcome a change in statute to include the State Librarian or designee on the committee in a more formal manner.

Sec. 4. 16 V.S.A. §§ 4014. EARLY EDUCATION

p.4 line 13-21

The proposed language in this section focuses on direct grants to public libraries to support early education programs for youth. If this language is adopted, public libraries in the state could compete for these funds, which could benefit the communities they serve. A concern is that this approach would favor large libraries, which are typically best able to apply for and administer grant funds of this type.

An approach to consider in conjunction with the language proposed in the bill is to look at the earlier text in §4014, and how it could be amended to provide more support for public library staff training about early education. For example:

(a) The Secretary may grant funds for voluntary early education programs. The funds may be used for personnel costs, training of parents and staff, materials and educational equipment, and other costs related to early education programs, including early education programs for public library staff.

Public libraries can play a pivotal role in early education as participation in library programming provide adults with instruction on how to read to best support their child's learning and encourage the practice of reading together daily. In its 2025 report, "The More Books the Better? Expanding Access to Early Childhood Literacy Resources" the Department recommended to the Legislature that it "an early childhood literacy education program for parents, caregivers, and public library staff."

Leveraging existing funds to support increased early education training for public library staff could help Vermont's youngest kids to be ready to read and learn. The Department is interested in increasing the support it provides for public library staff to increase access to high-caliber early education for all kids at their public library.

Sec. 5. 22 V.S.A. § 605 DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF LIBRARIES

p.5 line 3 – p.6 line 2

The Department appreciates the modernization of statute related to its collection. The Department recommends that the language in this section be revised to read, "The collection may be composed of digital ~~and or~~ physical materials." This more inclusive language would support the Department's plans to maintain both print and digital resources in its collections.

The Department requests further modernization of the language in 22 V.S.A. § 605 as follows:

(4) A general library collection...The Department shall provide ~~service materials~~ to other libraries in the State, schools, and individuals ~~and may provide through interlibrary loan service by mail or book wagon~~ and shall encourage and facilitate the sharing of library materials between libraries in Vermont and nationally through interlibrary loan.

The Department also requests that subsection (5) be revised to reflect the Department's current structure and staffing levels:

(5) A service of advice and consultation to all libraries in the State, in order to assist them in realizing their potential. ~~This service shall be provided at a regional level as well as at the State level.~~ The Department may provide centralized cataloging and other related technical services to libraries in the State to the extent feasible.

Sec. 6. 22 V.S.A. § 606 OTHER DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS

p. 6 lines 4-13

The Department notes that this level of granularity about the duties of the Department is unusual and that it may be duplicative of the Department's current work. The Department currently provides the library community with twice-weekly emails and a monthly newsletter, both of which include information about grant opportunities.

The Department develops and posts guidance documents relevant to the grant programs it administers on its website. It is the role of each granting entity to do the same for the grant programs it administers.

The Department can – and does – provide general training and continuing education related to grant writing and grant administration. The Department does not have a way to know about all grants available to municipal and incorporated public libraries. The proposed language sets a near-impossible bar.

Sec. 6. 22 V.S.A. § 606 OTHER DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS

p. 6 line 14 – p.7 line 3

The Department appreciates the recommended new language, which requires that the library entity meet the definition of public library in 22 V.S.A. § 101, and notes that there do seem to be entities operating as “public libraries” that do not meet that definition.

The Department recommends further revision of 24 V.S.A. § 1752a to eliminate ambiguity about the requirement that the public library entity meet the definition in 22 V.S.A. § 101 as follows:

§ 1752a. PUBLIC LIBRARIES; PRIVATELY OWNED MUNICIPALITY SUPPORTED LIBRARIES

By a majority vote of those present and voting at an annual or special meeting warned for the purpose, a municipality may issue municipal bonds under this chapter for the cost of capital improvements to any public library, as defined in 22 V.S.A. § 101, including ~~an incorporated public library any privately owned municipality-supported library~~ situated within the municipality for use of residents of the municipality; and such the improvements shall be considered “improvements” for the purposes of this chapter.

24 V.S.A. § 2783 ELIGIBILITY FOR PERFORMANCE GRANTS and 24 V.S.A. § 4307. MUNICIPAL BYLAW MODERNIZATION GRANTS

p. 7 line 4 – p. 8 line 15

Given the it is the policy of the General of the Assembly “that free public libraries are essential to the general enlightenment of citizens in a democracy and that every citizen of the State of Vermont should have access to the educational, cultural, recreational, informational, and research benefits of a free public library,” (22 V.S.A. § 67) it stands to reason that access to a public library should be among the considerations of those developing municipal and regional plans.

Finally, the Department requests the bill include the repeal of **V.S.A. § 608 Audio-Visual Revolving Fund**, as it is no longer relevant. Audio-visual materials within the Department’s collection are treated just as other physical collections.

~~There is established within the Department of Libraries a revolving fund for the audio-visual services unit to cover expenses of distribution of audio-visual materials. Receipts to the fund shall be from postage or delivery charges assessed by the Department to users of materials from this unit. (Added 1981, No. 108, § 323.)~~