

Report of the Advisory Council on Literacy

Act 28 of 2021, Section 5

REPORT

December 15, 2021

**Report to the House and Senate
Committees on Education**

Submitted by the Advisory Council on Literacy

Gwendolyn S. Carmolli, Chair



Legislation

This report is submitted pursuant to [Act 28 of 2021, Sec. 5](#), which establishes the Advisory Council on Literacy to advise the Agency of Education, State Board of Education, and General Assembly on ways to improve and sustain literacy outcomes (see [Powers and Duties](#)). This legislation requires annual reporting, on or before December 15.

Executive Summary

The Advisory Council on Literacy was established by the General Assembly in 2021 (Act 28) to advise the Agency of Education (AOE), State Board of Education (SBE) and General Assembly (GA) on ways to improve and sustain literacy outcomes, advising specifically on updates to [16 V.S.A. § 2903](#) (preventing early school failure, reading instruction), assistance to supervisory unions (SU/SDs) on implementing the statewide literacy plan, collection of literacy data, best practices for literacy instruction, and review of assessments and outcomes. The council is comprised of 16 members, evenly split by ex-officio members and members serving two-year terms.

The Council's recommendations need to:

- Address the need to increase literacy outcomes
- Address the need to close achievement gaps
- Support Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Support evidence-based instructional practices and intervention
- Promote and sustain the improvement of literacy outcomes

The Council reviewed literacy assessment outcomes presented by the AOE. The statewide assessment results demonstrated broad literacy trends of overall low achievement, achievement gaps, and declining scores that have an impact on learning throughout school and beyond.

Assessment data show:

- Declines of student performance in reading between 2015 and 2019 (National Assessment of Educational Progress)
- Only approximately 50% of third grade students met proficiency in English Language Arts (Smarter Balanced Assessment)
- Both assessments demonstrate gaps in achievement by historically marginalized when compared to their non-marginalized peers.

The Council reviewed 16 V.S.A. § 2903 and found many areas of strength and alignment with current understanding of the importance of literacy instruction and best practices, including: a focus in highly effective, research-based instruction in early grades, and supplemental reading instructions for students not meeting proficiency above third grade expectations.

The Council recommends the following updates, changes or additions to improve this section of law:

- Updates to conform with existing statute and best practice language in the field (e.g. change "research-based" to "evidence-based" to align with current federal nomenclature)

- Expansion of literacy focus to early grades (PreK and kindergarten), as they are foundational learning years for future learning. This also would bring this section into alignment with the language of Act 28.
- Expand supplemental reading instruction to learners who need it in any grade, not just after grade 4.
- Adding a provision to 16 V.S.A. § 2903 addressing alignment of assessments across grade levels to better inform instruction across time.

Background

Act 28

Act 28, an act related to improving prekindergarten through grade 12 literacy within the State of Vermont, was passed in May 2021 by the Vermont General Assembly and signed by Governor Phil Scott. Act 28 acknowledged the continuous nature of the work to improve literacy outcomes across the state and provided funding and support for efforts to improve and sustain literacy outcomes.

The act established funds for professional development on literacy, funds for a position at the Agency of Education focused on literacy, funds for technical assistance and support for supervisory unions to implement systems-wide evidence-based literacy approaches, support for 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.

Advisory Council on Literacy

Act 28 established an Advisory Council on Literacy to advise the Agency of Education, the State Board of Education, and the General Assembly on how to improve and sustain proficiency outcomes in literacy for students in prekindergarten through grade 12.

Powers and Duties

The act outlined the following powers and duties of the Advisory Council on Literacy: to advise the Agency of Education, State Board of Education, and General Assembly on ways to improve and sustain proficiency outcomes for prekindergarten through grade 12 students. Specific areas to advise include providing:

1. Updates for Section 2903 of Title I6 (16 V.S.A. §2903), as well as implementation and maintenance of the statewide literacy plan;
2. 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;
3. Plan for collecting literacy-related data that informs instructional practices, teacher professional development, and literacy assessments;
4. Best practices in literacy instruction for tiers 1, 2, and 3, within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to improve and sustain literacy proficiency; and

5. Review of literacy assessments and outcomes and how to continuously improve and sustain literacy improvements.

In addition, the Council shall 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.

Membership

The Act outlined membership of the Advisory Council on Literacy, with representation across various roles and perspectives. Ex officio members hold a permanent spot on the Council, remaining positions are held for 2-year positions terms, with possibility of two consecutive terms.

Ex Officio Roles and Current Members:

- Vermont Secretary of Education, Daniel French
- Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators (VSBPE), Bill Clark
- Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA), Chelsea Myers
- Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA), Sandra Cameron
- Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators (VCSEA), Darren McIntyre
- Vermont Principals' Association (VPA), Beth O'Brien, Vice Chair
- Vermont Independent Schools Association (VISA), Mill Moore
- Vermont-National Education Association (VT NEA), Donald Tinney

Two-Year Term Roles and Current Members:

- Vermont Curriculum Leaders Association, Gwen Carmolli, Chair
- Vermont-National Education Association (VT NEA) Teachers - Catherine Campbell, Jennifer Farnsworth, Susan Koch
- Community Members - Cynthia Gardner-Morse, Emily Lesh, Julia Spaulding
- Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE) Special Education Specialist, Jacqui Kelleher

Common Goal

The Council is composed of members with a wide variety of roles and expertise, all sharing the goal to increase achievement for Vermont students. Council members are deeply committed to increasing literacy outcomes for prekindergarten through grade 12 students and closing achievement gaps for historically marginalized students. The Council aims to build literacy skills in reading, writing, and communication, and build enjoyment of literacy for students during the school years and beyond. To meet these goals, the Council expects Vermont students will have:

- Access to high quality early learning opportunities in literacy
- A strong foundation of literacy skills
- Instruction premised on state standards and evidenced-based instructional practices
- Foundational reading instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension
- Instruction from a teacher who is skilled in teaching reading

- Instruction that is based on a multi-tiered system of support

Meetings

As of writing, the Advisory Council on Literacy has convened four times: August 31, September 24, October 27, and November 29. Eight meetings are planned for the 2021-2022 school year.

2021-2022 Work Plan

The focus of the Council's work for the 2021-2022 school year is on assessment outcomes, [§ 2903](#), and on the statewide literacy plan, [Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK Through Third Grade](#). The Council developed and agreed to the following work plan for the 2021-2022 year:

- Hold eight meetings per year: August, September, October, November, January, March, April, May/June
- Meet online for the 2021-2022 year
- Provide opportunity for public to view meetings and make public comment
- Maintain information on the Vermont Agency of Education website
- Begin each year with Council organization and data outcomes overview
- Work sequentially through tasks 1-4 outlined in Act 28 - task 5 is a recurring task that will be done annually
- Report to the Vermont House and Senate Education Committees by December 15 of each year

August 2021: Council Organization - Membership & Leadership Selection

September 2021: Council Organization - Overview & Work Plan

October 2021: Assessment Outcomes & § 2903 Input

November 2021: § 2903 - Council Recommendations & Outline for report to House & Senate Education Committees

December 2021: Report to House & Senate Education Committees (Note: This is a date for report submission, not Council meeting.)

January 2022: Data Questions & Literacy Blueprint - Overview

March 2022: Literacy Blueprint - Content

April 2022: Literacy Blueprint - Implementation Plan

May 2022: Literacy Blueprint - Council Recommendations

June - July 2022: Sub-Committee Work: Supports for Districts

Tasks

As the Council works through the tasks outlined in Act 28 to develop recommendations, specific criteria will guide discussion, consideration, and final advisory recommendations. Decisions and recommendations will be made in alignment with [Act 28](#), [Act 173](#), and Vermont's

Education Quality Standards ([EOS](#)), based on the following criteria. Decisions and recommendations need to:

- Address the need to increase literacy outcomes
- Address the need to close achievement gaps
- Support Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Support evidence-based instructional practices and intervention
- Promote and sustain the improvement of literacy outcomes

Assessment Outcomes Review

The Council reviewed assessment results, presented from the Vermont Agency of Education. The presentation reviewed two statewide summative assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), to understand Vermont's literacy outcomes and trends. Vermont's Agency of Education reported overall low achievement, achievement gaps for historically marginalized students, and a trend showing a decline in scores.

The presentation showed similar trends with both statewide assessments and demonstrated a need to improve literacy outcomes for students. Data from NAEP showed the average score of fourth grade students declined 8 points from 2015 to 2019, from 230 points in 2015 to 222 points, scores well below the NAEP proficiency score of 238. However, Vermont's fourth grade students scored 3 points above the national average of 219. Of further concern, the data demonstrates large achievement gaps for students with disabilities, and students in poverty (as measured by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program).

Data from SBAC demonstrated that approximately only 50% of third grade students met proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA). In other words, half of the third-grade students in Vermont did not meet proficiency in ELA. The average scaled score for third graders on the ELA portion of SBAC assessment dropped 2 points from 2018 to 2019, from 2428 in 2018 to 2426 in 2019. SBAC and NAEP showed similar results, with SBAC showing a large achievement gap for historically marginalized student groups (defined by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and disability) in every grade level. Marginalized groups scored 24-30 percentage points lower than their peers on the ELA portion of SBAC assessment. Moreover, the gap widens as students' progress through the grades.

It is important to note that, as with all data, there are limitations to what NAEP and SBAC can tell us. NAEP and SBAC assessments help build an understanding of broad literacy trends in Vermont and comparative national data, yet there may be additional measures to consider. The Council will advise the Agency of Education on collecting literacy-related data and literacy assessments, as a duty assigned in Act 28.

In summary, the statewide assessment results demonstrated broad literacy trends of overall low achievement, achievement gaps, and declining scores that have an impact on learning throughout school and beyond. With 50% of third grade students failing to meet state standards, the state's commitment to improving and sustaining literacy outcomes is critical. The Council looks forward to continually monitoring assessment results to gain insight into

students' achievement levels, track progress toward Vermont's literacy goals, and ultimately to improve literacy outcomes for Vermont's students.

Input on 16 V.S.A. § 2903

[16 V.S.A. § 2903 - Preventing early school failure; reading instruction](#) is a policy to address early school failure and reading instruction in the early grades. The statute outlined a requirement to develop and implement a plan for a comprehensive system of instruction and services in the first three grades, that would be updated every five years. The original plan was submitted in 1998; the most recent plan was submitted in 2019.

Recommendations

In order to make recommendations on how to update § 2903, the Advisory Council on Literacy reviewed, discussed, and gathered input from its members in three areas: existing statute strengths, suggested changes, and additional areas to add. Based on a consensus process for review and input, the Council offers the following recommendations:

Strengths

The Council found overall agreement and support for this statute, recognizing the importance of literacy in the early grades, high quality literacy instruction, and a multi-tiered system of support to help students meet literacy proficiency.

Several areas of strength were recognized in the statute. These areas of strength are aligned with Act 28, Act 173, Vermont's Education Quality Standards; serve to support foundational literacy instruction and multi-tiered systems of support; and encourage increasing successful outcomes for Vermont students.

The Council found three areas of strength in § 2903:

- “The ability to read is critical to success in learning.” - subsection (a)

The Council agrees that reading is critical to success in learning and has implications for success in school and beyond. Early reading success is critical.

- “Reading instruction. A public school that offers instruction in grades one, two or three shall provide highly effective, research-based reading instruction to all students.”
- subsection (c)

The Council supports highly effective, research and evidenced-based literacy instruction for all students. This is foundational learning for all students.

- “Supplemental reading instruction to any enrolled student in grade four whose reading proficiency falls below third grade reading expectations.” - subdivision (c) (2)

The Council supports supplemental reading instruction as a critical need when proficiency in reading is below grade level. Supplemental reading instruction is a critical need for students to assist students in working toward proficiency in reading and is a critical component of multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

Additional discussion to note:

- While research-based is an important aspect of understanding effective instructional practice, the term “research-based” no longer meets the Federal language and requirements. “Evidence-based” is the language currently used in Federal language and requirements. (See Areas to Change below)
- The Council feels highly effective reading instruction may need to extend beyond grades 1-3, to include literacy instruction in prekindergarten and kindergarten, and for grades beyond grade 4. This may be particularly important for students with reading difficulties, and for students with learning English.
- The critical nature of literacy instruction holds for students across Vermont. While funding and curricula may differ for public and independent schools, proficiency of reading is critical for all Vermont students.
- Students may need supplemental instruction at any grade, extending beyond grade four.
- Students may have a need for varied supplemental instruction, based on individual learning needs, such as reading difficulties, specific areas of disability, or learning English Language (EL).
- Supplemental instruction may vary in intensity, based on students’ learning needs. Some students may require more intensive supplemental instruction than others.

Areas to Change:

Within the current statute, changes in two areas may be needed to align with current Federal language or State citation. Suggested changes are shown with an underline to add, and a strikethrough to omit.

- Change research-based to evidence-based - subsection (c)

Federal documents currently reflect evidence-based as the language and requirement for educational criteria and decisions.

Suggested change: “A public school that offers instruction in grades one, two, or three shall provide high effective, evidence-based reading instruction to all students.

- Change the statute number to reflect the current MTSS statute: §2902 - subsection (c)(1)

The current statute for Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is §2902.

Suggested change: “...as defined under subdivision 2902 of this title;”

Areas to consider changing

As the Council gathered input, it asked if there were areas to consider changing. Two areas of change met group consensus:

- Add preschool and kindergarten in Foundation for Literacy - subsection (b)

Consider adding preschool and kindergarten to section (b) to align § 2903 with Act 28. Prekindergarten and kindergarten are included in Act 28 and are foundational learning years for learning in future grades. This statute could better align to Act 28 by including prekindergarten and kindergarten in the language. Act 28 uses the following language:

"recommend evidence-based best practices in teaching literacy instruction to students in prekindergarten through grade 3."

Suggested changes:

"for early education in preschool, kindergarten and first three grades" - subsection (b)

"shall develop a plan for establishing a comprehensive system of services for early education (grades prekindergarten through grade 3) to ensure that all students learn to read by the end of the third grade." - subsection (b)

- ***Include supplemental reading instruction for learners who may have a need in any grade, not just beyond grade 4*** - subsection (c)

Current language in section (c) indicates supplemental reading instruction in grade 4, subdivision (c) (1), or grades 5-12 (c) (2), needed to support reading proficiency. Students may need supplemental reading instruction in any grade, prekindergarten through grade 12, not just in the grades currently outlined.

Suggested changes:

"supplemental reading instruction to any enrolled student whose reading proficiency falls below third grade level reading expectations." - subdivision (c) (1)

"supplemental reading instruction to any enrolled student whose reading proficiency creates a barrier to the student's success in school." - subdivision (c) (2)

Additional discussion to note:

- Consideration for independent schools may be needed based on differing funding and curricula from public schools.
- Supplemental instruction based on students' learning needs is particularly important for students with reading difficulties or diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, and for English Language (EL) learners.
- Supplemental reading instruction supports proficiency of literacy and the proficiency of other content areas.

Areas to consider adding:

As the Council reviewed the statute and gathered input, members considered possible additions. One suggested addition met consensus:

- ***Add Alignment of Assessments***

16 V.S.A. § 2903 does not discuss alignment of assessments across grade levels. Assessment is a critical component of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), which is part of Act 28 and Act 173. Alignment of assessments, across grade levels, and with consideration of validity and reliability, would strengthen § 2903.

Suggested change: Add an assessment subsection, (d), that would include an alignment of valid and reliable assessments across all grade levels to inform instruction over time.

Next Steps

The next step for the Council is to conduct a review of the statewide literacy plan, *Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK Through Third Grade*, for input, discussion, and development of advice. By December of 2022, the Council aims to have recommendations on the statewide literacy plan and develop recommendations on support for school districts.

Beginning in the summer, the Council will add sub-committee work to begin research on upcoming tasks for the full Council to address in the upcoming year.

In 2022 and beyond, the Council will continually work to advise the Agency of Education, House and Senate Committees on Education, and State Board of Education on developing a plan for collecting literacy-related data to inform practices in the field, identify best practices in literacy instruction for tiers 1, 2, and 3 within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and continue to review literacy assessment outcomes to ensure continuous and sustained literacy improvements.

Acknowledgements

The Advisory Council on Literacy wishes to thank the Agency of Education, the House and Senate Committees on Education, and the State Board of Education for their leadership and continued support of improving literacy outcomes for Vermont students.