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I am Cynthia Gardner-Morse. I live where I grew up, in Calais, Vermont. I attended and taught in one room schools. For graduate school, I was honored to have a chance to study with Dr. Jeanne Chall, who coined the transition of elementary students “from learning to read to reading to learn.”

Our new Secretary of Education should be experienced in changing an entrenched system.

Vermont teachers are dedicated and smart. However, they cannot teach what they don't know. Our colleges receive poor marks from objective reviewers for our teacher training programs for reading and writing. Our student scores indicate that we can and must do better, for all students, including those who are marginalized or underprivileged. We need to change and improve our both pre-and in-service teacher training, and we need knowledgeable leadership to do this.

We need teachers who understand effective evidence-based instruction. Our teachers should screen for academic problems. They should monitor their students' progress using Response to Intervention (RtI). These changes need to be required by leadership at the Agency of Education. (Some good policies are on the books in Vermont, but school districts are either unaware of them, or choose to ignore them.)

We do have behavior problems in our schools. Once children improve their reading skills, though, their behaviors will improve. Children want to learn to read. Frustrated children act out. A focus on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) should go hand in hand with engaging direct, sequential, research-based teaching. Our new Secretary should be familiar with both.

This Secretary will be stepping into an Agency that is looking to make improvements. That is a good thing. And other states are moving toward better science-based teaching, so we have successful states with whom to consult. A wise Secretary will recognize this and reach out.

Thank you for seeking out this public input.