

8197 County Road  
Calais, VT 05648-7517  
4 October 2023

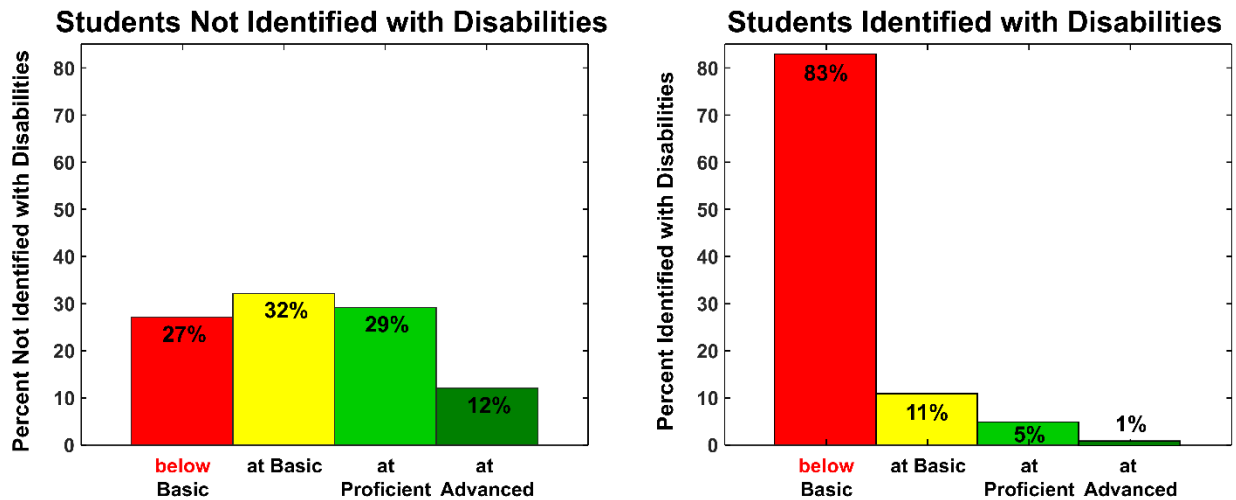
Jennifer Samuelson, Chair  
Vermont State Board of Education  
Montpelier, VT 05620

Dear Chair Samuelson and the Vermont State Board of Education,

I'm writing concerning your request for the qualities and attributes of the Secretary of Education.

I'm really concerned about special education. Based on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 83% of Vermont's children receiving special education are "below Basic" (cannot read) in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading. Only three states had a higher percent "below Basic" than Vermont (making Vermont 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation), despite Vermont spending twice the national average on special education!

**2022 Vermont Grade 4 Reading Achievement Level**  
The Nation's Report Card (National Assessment of Educational Progress)



We need a Secretary of Education who recognizes this equity problem, understands the importance of structured literacy (e.g., phonemic awareness and phonics) in ameliorating the problem, and can lead teachers in reforming the teaching of reading.

The Agency of Education whitewashes the problem. While [their course syllabi review](#) of our teacher colleges gave them high marks, the [National Council of Teacher Quality](#) gave our teacher colleges D's and F's because our colleges still teach multiple techniques or "approaches" contrary to research-based practices. So, we need a leader who recognizes the problems with the lack of literacy knowledge in our teacher colleges and within the Agency of Education. Who will bring structured literacy to meet the needs of all our students, and in particular our students with disabilities?

We need a leader who is not swayed by professional groups that have failed to improve reading in Vermont. I was shocked [the Agency of Education allowed the Partnerships for Literacy and Learning to remove](#) any mention of Response to Intervention (RtI) from Vermont's MTSS guide.

We need a leader who recognizes the importance of newer research such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and spelling instruction to reading success, as well as the importance of the five major findings of the National Reading Panel.

Dr. Timothy Shanahan, [Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a member of the National Reading Panel](#), in his blog entitled, "[Is Emily Hanford Right?](#)" observes:

"Studies show that explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction consistently provide a learning advantage. There are no such studies supporting 3-cueing. ..."

"There are many ways to teach reading. It is sophistry, however, to pretend that these ways are all equal. Phonics provides a clear advantage.

... Let's say that I'm willing to entertain the idea that all children learn differently. If that is the case, then why aren't these critics up in arms about programs that omit or minimize phonics given that research has found such omissions to be especially harmful to our most vulnerable children? Their position seems to be not just inconsistent, but hard hearted and downright mean."

In Dr. Shanahan's blog entitled, "[More on the PBS News Hour Dyslexia Segment](#)", he finds:

"The best statement about quality phonics instruction that I've found is from the International Dyslexia Association. They don't endorse any particular phonics product, but their instructional principles concerning structured phonics instruction are impeccable and sensible and, until we gain more empirical evidence, I think they should be the standard:

<https://app.box.com/s/21gdk2k1p3bnagdfz1xy0v98j5ytl1wk>"

Don't we want our new Secretary of Education to direct teachers to learn and use the most effective methods?

As highlighted in this week's [Seven Days' cover story](#), teachers like Dr. Dorinne Dorfman and Julie Brown are having success using structured literacy and may be assets to the Board of Education. We need more superintendent like Superintendent Sherry Sousa who support teachers using structured literacy. I urge the Board to listen to their comments and suggestions.

Dr. Reid Lyon (also mentioned in the Seven Days' cover story) notes that a failure to recognize and help our young struggling readers can [lead to motivational and emotional problems](#) with lifelong consequences. This failure *creates* non-readers.

In an interview with Children of the Code, Dr. Lyon states, "[Basically what it points to is that children, like all of us, tend to move away from what brings about shame. Moving away from print is almost second order to moving away from feeling shame...](#)"<sup>1</sup> Continuing, "[b]etter said, lousy reading produces a perception of stupidity and dumbness to peers and clearly to the youngster who is struggling. That is the shame." Vermont performing artist and educator [Lida Winfield](#) states in her "In Search of Air: Growing up Dyslexic" performance, "[I would rather be angry, sad, heartbroken, or anxious than feel the isolation and hopelessness of feeling – dumb.](#)"<sup>2</sup>

[Students with learning disabilities have a three times higher risk of attempting suicide.](#)<sup>3</sup> Eighty nine percent (89%) of suicide notes contain dyslexic-type spelling errors.<sup>4</sup>

[Two-thirds \(2/3\) of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare.](#)<sup>5</sup> Governor Howard Dean observed, "The truth is that in our prisons, 85-90% of the inmates are dropouts, most because they never could figure out how to read."<sup>6</sup>

We need strong leadership to improve the educational equity of our children with disabilities!

About 80-85% of children with specific learning disability (SLD) have significant reading difficulties like dyslexia. As shown in the graphs below, less than 11 students identified with SLD (less than 2.2% of the number of children with SLD in sixth grade) are receiving special education services in kindergarten in the 2021-2022 school year. Even in first grade, only 8.7% (less than 10%!) of the number of children with SLD in sixth grade were identified and getting services. Vermont schools are missing too many children with disabilities, and finding them far too late.

---

<sup>1</sup> Children of the Code, <https://childrenofthecode.org>, [Interview Dr. G. Reid Lyon](#) – Converging Evidence – Reading Research What It Takes To Read, Sept. 11, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Winfield, Lida, [Vimeo video: In Search of Air: Growing up Dyslexic Promo](#), 2015. For more information on Lida Winfield, please see: <https://www.lidawinfield.com/keynote>

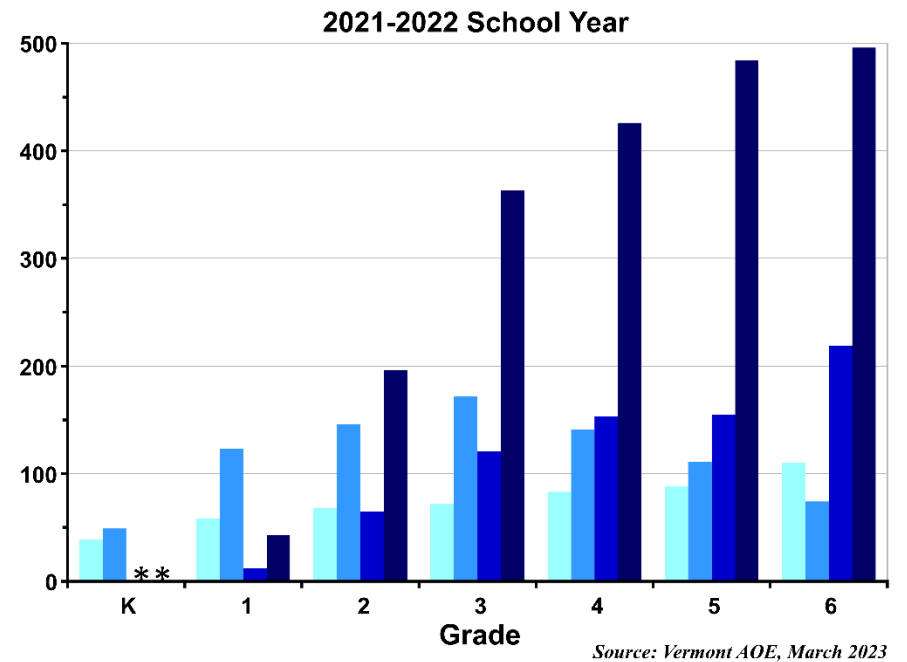
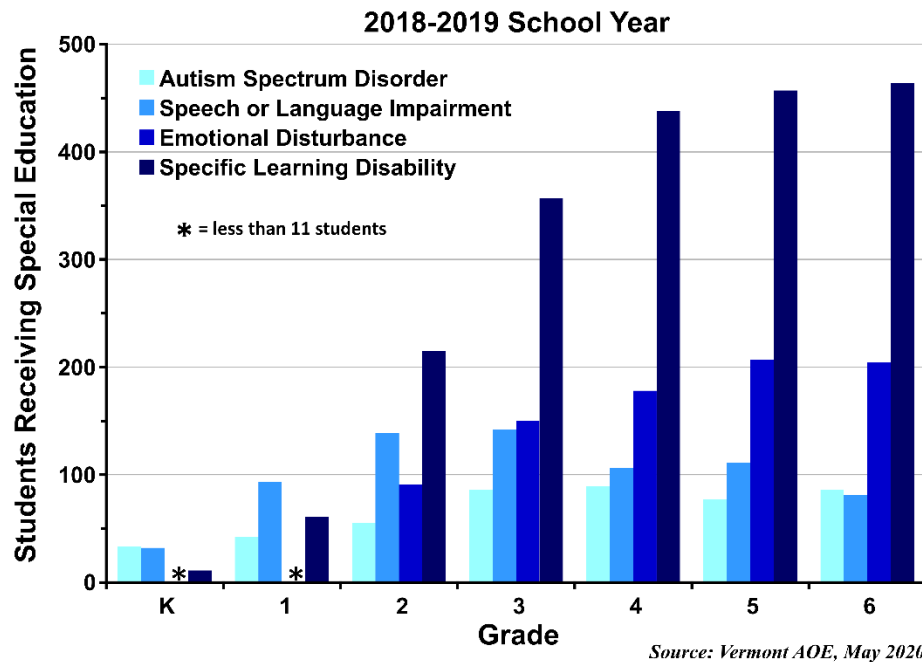
<sup>3</sup> Daniel, S.S., Walsh, A.K., Goldston, D.B., Arnold, E.M., Reboussin, B.A. and Wood, F.B. Suicidality, School Dropout and Reading Problems Among Adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(6):507-514, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> McBride, H.E.A. and L.S. Siegel, L.S. Learning Disabilities and Adolescent Suicide. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30(6):652-659, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Harvard Graduate School of Education, [Reach Every Reader, Why Reading?](#) Harvard University, Apian Way, Cambridge, MA, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Wellington, Todd. "Governor Talks Education", *Caledonian Record*, April 1, 1999, p. 1A

## Most Vermont students with Specific Learning Disabilities are not getting services until after 1st grade



Also note that as the number of children with SLD increase with grades, so too does the number of children with an emotional disturbance disability. Vermont leads the nation in the percent of children with an emotional disturbance disability. Vermont's poor reading outcomes for children with disabilities might contribute to these children's emotional problems.

If Vermont schools are required by law to identify children with disabilities, why are they getting identified so late?

One reason for Vermont's late identification of struggling children is the failure of school districts to implement Response to Intervention (RtI) (part of a Multi-Tiered System of Support [MTSS]). This despite a [tiered system of support requirement in Vermont law](#)<sup>7</sup> RtI is a system of universal screening, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluations to insure early identification and effective instruction.

<sup>7</sup> [16 V.S.A. § 2902](#). Tiered system of supports and educational support team.

[The National Center on Improving Literacy](#) (NCIL, a partnership among literacy experts, university researchers, and technical assistance providers, with funding from the United States Department of Education) states, “There is broad agreement that schools should implement early screening and intervention programs. [State legislation generally favors the use of universal screening within schools across grades K-2, where students are screened annually to assess risk for dyslexia and other reading disabilities.](#)”<sup>8</sup> See also their [considerations in universal screening.](#)<sup>9</sup> [Vermont is one of only 10 states that does not have regulations requiring screening for dyslexia and other reading disabilities in K-2.](#)<sup>10</sup>

David Kilpatrick, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology for the State University of New York College at Cortland and also a New York State Certified School Psychologist, points out that [Response to Intervention \(RtI\) produced such strong results by using intensive phonemic awareness and intensive letter-sound instruction.](#)<sup>11</sup> He cites two National Institute of Child Health and Human Development supported research studies.

A strong background in research-proven reading instruction methods must be a pre-requisite for Vermont’s new Secretary of Education.

**We need a Secretary of Education who will lead Vermont in reforming teacher preparation, teacher professional development, and in implementing research-proven reading instruction methods in our classrooms.**

Thank you for the opportunity to make public comments. If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Mack Gardner-Morse

(802) 223-5738 (landline – no texts)  
gardnermorse@gmail.com

---

<sup>8</sup> National Center on Improving Literacy, [Best Practices in Universal Screening](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> National Center on Improving Literacy, [Considerations in universal screening](#). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> National Center on Improving Literacy, [State of Dyslexia](#), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2020. See “Screening Policies” tab.

<sup>11</sup> School Psyched Podcast, [SPP 73: Assessing and Supporting Reading Difficulties with Dr. Kilpatrick](#), Oct. 21, 2018.