



January 25, 2022

Subject: Summary of SB 127, Early literacy outcomes improvement

To whom it may concern:

SB 127 (Early literacy outcomes improvement) is Sen. Millner's attempt at pushing Utah's public schools to have 70% of students at grade level in literacy by the end of 3rd grade. Her target date for achieving that 70% threshold is July 1, 2027. At present Utah schools stand at about 44%, so this is an ambitious goal.

The bill proposes several simultaneous efforts to achieve that goal. First, a statewide literacy panel¹ will be the research base LEAs and the State Board will turn to for effective learning modules, curricula and other teacher resources.² The first draft of the bill suggests LEAs will have to select early literacy curricula from a list pre-approved by this panel. Based on conversations with Sen. Millner, that is not the intent, and a forthcoming substitute should reflect that.³

Second, all elementary school teachers and principals⁴ must take a science of reading course,⁵ and pass a literacy preparation assessment.⁶ The science of reading course is almost certain to be LETRS,⁷ and teachers and principals will

¹ The panel may have up to 6 members, and may include legislators. There is good reason to believe professors from Utah State's Department of Education will form the core of this panel.

² In many ways, this bill is designed to guarantee that LEAs implement practices based around the science of reading and instruction in the science of reading. The members of this panel must already be experts in the science of reading, so the research base will reflect that.

³ It is not at all clear how Sen. Millner will react when (inevitably) one or more LEAs adopts an early learning curriculum that does not implement the science of reading.

⁴ This list includes special education teachers who do not exclusively serve students with significant cognitive disabilities, LEA administrators over literacy, school psychologists working in an elementary school, an elementary school literacy coach who serves K-3, and current or prospective elementary school principals. All of these people must take this literacy preparation course by July 1, 2025. Teachers within 1 year of retirement and dual language educators (in the target language) also do not need to take the course.

⁵ If someone on the list has already taken the early literacy program (i.e., LETRS), that person does not need to take it again. In addition, all license applicants – whether they come through university or Appel preparation programs, must receive instruction in the science of reading.

⁶ This assessment does not presently exist, or at least the State Board has not chosen what that assessment may be.

⁷ LETRS is the module that Mississippi used, whose early literacy program Sen. Millner is copying. In addition, the State Board has trained nearly 9,000 teachers in LETRS, so replacing it with a different course would upset the LEAs and teachers.

have the option of demonstrating competency instead of taking the assessment.

Third, the State Board will provide trained literacy coaches to schools with low literacy rates. These literacy coaches will coach teachers in grades K-3.⁸ At a minimum, schools with low literacy rates include schools in the bottom ¼ of schools in literacy performance (as defined by the State Board) and schools participating in the Partnerships for Student Success Grant Program.⁹ Fourth, regional professional learning consultants will support the efforts of LEAs and RESAs in designing research-informed/-based professional learning that meet existing standards.

The bill also requires the State Board to “partner” with a private business or non profit that will “annually provide personal, home-use, age-appropriate printed books or digital books with accompanying reading devices to K-3 students who attend a Title 1 school or a school in the PSSGP. The State Board will also “contract” with one or more organizations with expertise organizing community resources to train and coach parent engagement coordinators.¹⁰

To accomplish these elements, the State Board will administer several grant programs. One grant program will guarantee that licensees do not have to pay for the first taking of the literacy preparation assessment.¹¹ Another grant program will pay the costs for an LEA to provide the literacy preparation program (LETRS).¹²

The bill also has other provisions more directly related to higher education. Because they are not my clients, I have not summarized those portions.

⁸ The bill acknowledges that these coaches are SBE, not LEA employees. In that regard, it empowers the State Board, by rule, to “define lines of authority and responsibility between a literacy coach, the school principal, the LEA and the state board” (see lines 167-168). However, the bill also says that the State Board shall have one staff position supervise these coaches. Presumably that’s an SBE employee, though the language is not dispositive.

⁹ Schools participating in this grant program must also now focus on grade 3 mathematics, in addition to the other subject areas already in statute.

¹⁰ It is not at all clear who these coordinators would be, what they would do, whether there is an organization Sen. Millner or others already have in mind.

¹¹ License applicants may take the literacy preparation assessment up to 3 times. The applicant is responsible for the cost of taking the assessment after the first time. Educator preparation programs, including Appel programs, will have an obligation to provide ongoing support for license applicants whom they prepared, but did not pass the assessment on the first or second try.

¹² It is difficult to tell whether they expect some or all LEAs to have to come out of pocket to provide this training.