

Senate Education Committee

Peter Mulvey 271-4063

HB 604, relative to reading specialists.

Hearing Date: April 11, 2023

Time Opened: 10:57 a.m.

Time Closed: 11:12 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Gendreau, Lang, Prentiss and Fenton

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill allows the department of education to employ a staff member who is a reading specialist.

Sponsors:
Rep. Cordelli

Who supports the bill: In total, 24 individuals signed in-support of HB 604. For a copy of the sign-in sheet, contact Legislative Aide Pete D. Mulvey (peter.mulvey@leg.state.nh.us).

Who opposes the bill: None.

Who is neutral on the bill: None.

Summary of testimony presented:

Representative Linda Tanner

Sullivan - District 5

- Representative Tanner introduced HB 604 on behalf of Representative Cordelli.
- HB 604 would require the State Department of Education to employ a reading specialist as a staff member.
- Rep. Tanner shared that she had worked on several dyslexia-related bills in the 2023 session.
- Rep. Tanner reminded the Committee that reading proficiency scores had declined ever since COVID.
- In Rep. Tanner's experience, students who had trouble reading would suffer tremendously throughout their academic career. Those students deserved attention and guidance according to Rep. Tanner.
- Rep. Tanner was in full support of HB 604.

- It was recommended that the Committee amend HB 604 to clarify what standards and qualifications the Department reading specialist would be expected to fulfill.
 - Rep. Tanner elaborated, indicating that she believed a specialist would ideally have a master's degree in reading and literacy, possess a teaching certificate, and have some supervised practical experience with students who had reading disabilities.
 - Further, Rep. Tanner provided that the reading specialist ought to be aware of cognitive developmental language acquisition and development, should understand children and youth literature, and be adept at curriculum development and literacy assessment.
- Sen. Ward asked Rep. Tanner if she sought for specific qualifications to be prescribed for the role in question.
 - Rep. Tanner confirmed that she sought specific qualifications. However, she said ideally the standards would not be so specific to the extent in which procurement would be difficult, but rather specific enough so that candidates would be highly qualified in literacy and diagnostics.
- Sen. Prentiss asked Rep. Tanner if she had language to amend HB 604 as she saw fit, or if she would prefer rulemaking to fulfill her recommendations to the Committee.
 - Rep. Tanner indicated that she would defer the question to Ms. Melissa White of the State Department of Education.
- Sen. Lang clarified that the role of reading specialist was defined in statute, specifically within RSA 200:60-(II), which mandated that a reading specialist shall be trained and certified in best practice interventions and treatment models for dyslexia and its related disorders, have three years of experience at a minimum, be responsible for the implementation of professional awareness and shall serve as the primary source of information and support for school districts to address the needs of students with reading disorders.
 - Rep. Tanner replied that the definition offered in statute did not prescribe a specific degree, which was what Rep. Tanner suggested to be a necessity.
 - Rep. Tanner added that an elementary school teacher who had minor additional coursework would be considered a reading specialist under the definition included within RSA 200:60-(II).

Melissa White

Director, Division of Learning Support, New Hampshire Department of Education

- According to existing law, Ms. White said the Department of Education was required to secure the services of a reading specialist through contracting.
- HB 604 would enable the Department to comply with State statute without having to contract a third-party reading specialist.
- Sen. Prentiss asked Ms. White for her thoughts on Rep. Tanner's suggestion to amend RSA 200:60-(II) to further define what standards a reading specialist ought to meet.
 - Ms. White said she believed the current required qualifications to be specific enough and suggested that a specific degree requirement would limit the Department's ability to field effective candidates.
- Sen. Prentiss asked if certifications were more productive towards achieving greater outcomes than a degree.
 - Ms. White concurred and said extensive field experience would assist greater than a degree would.

- Sen. Ward asked if RSA 200:60-(II) required a reading specialist to possess a master's degree in reading or literacy.
 - Ms. White reiterated that the RSA did not mandate a particular degree requirement.
- Sen. Ward asked if there were any degree requirements enumerated within RSA 200:60-(II).
 - Ms. White said that although it was not explicitly mandated in statute, realistically, one would need a master's degree to fulfill the requirements and standards that were in statute.
- Sen. Lang asked Ms. White if she thought imposing a degree requirement in statute would harm districts and endanger those currently employed as reading specialists who may meet all the expected qualifications despite not possessing a master's degree.
 - Ms. White clarified that RSA 200:60-(II) only applied to the position within the Department of Education, and did not extend to district positions, therefore Sen. Lang's concern was mitigated.
 - Ms. White suggested that the Committee refer to RSAs 200:58 and 200:59 for further clarity.