

## MEMORANDUM

TO: House Education Committee  
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director  
DATE: January 17, 2023  
RE: Vermont-NEA Introductory Testimony

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Thank you for inviting me to talk a little bit about Vermont-NEA's priorities and about how we can work together to ensure that all Vermont students can succeed and become happy, productive adults. I am Jeff Fannon, and as the union's executive director, I want to take a moment to note just how important our local public schools are, especially in the third year of a global pandemic.

Before the pandemic, Vermont's public schools were the centers of their communities where generations of students learned, explored, played, and thrived. Not to brag – well, maybe just a little – our schools then and now have consistently outperformed nearly all of their peers across the country.

That didn't happen by accident. Vermonters – and this legislature – invested in their local public schools because they – and you – know how crucial a top-quality public education is to our future. They – and you – also know that for most cities and towns, local public schools are huge economic development drivers. Excellent local public schools are, simply put, crucial to our state's growth and success.

That remains true even after the unprecedented challenges our public schools faced – and met – with the onset of the global pandemic. Indeed, what the pandemic showed us was that our schools are a safe haven for kids; a provider of meals to all students; a place where students and their families can rely on even in times of turmoil. And behind it all are the state's dedicated public school employees: the teachers, paraeducators, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, librarians, school counselors, administrators, and local school boards. They work hard every day to ensure that the ravages of the pandemic don't prevent our state's children from getting the education they need and deserve.

I am proud of our schools, and you should be, too. But that doesn't mean we are without challenges.

Vermont's public schools remain a strong economic driver for the state. Schools are achieving and recovering from the pandemic, but there are some realities that must be recognized. The mental health system in Vermont is broken, and because schools are where Vermont's children all are found, schools are stepping up in new and creative ways to address the social and emotional needs of students. Previously, these were Agency of Human Services costs, but they have been shifted to schools and the education fund, and these new solutions require human

beings, i.e., staff, to provide services inside the schools. Schools need to be celebrated for stepping into the mental health breach, but their work and corresponding expenses should be removed from education spending. This social and emotional needs work is absolutely critical to the success of our students and schools, and this work must and will continue.

This year, we will focus our work on providing schools with the resources and people they need to respond to the social and emotional needs of students. Obviously, there is a shortage of educators, and all of us must devise ways to ensure that Vermont continues to attract and retain an excellent public education workforce. To that end, we have been working with the curriculum directors in the Kingdom to grow their own teachers. That program, called GrowVT-Ed, has 81 para-educators who are working with Vermont-NEA's director of professional programs, Juliette Longchamp, EdD, to become licensed teachers. That is an example of our work and public schools' work that supports students, schools, and communities.

We think looking at whether we have enough counselors and mental health professionals in each of our schools is a worthy exercise. For example, because we know the social and emotional needs are so great right now, we believe there should be more school counselors, school social workers, and other mental health professionals in schools.

Indeed, we all must recognize the toll to social and emotional well-being the pandemic has taken on students, and we look forward to working with you to give our dedicated public school workforce the tools they require to address the needs of all students.

To that end, attached is a brief introduction of our legislative agenda. These items were initially created by Vermont-NEA's members, were approved by the Vermont-NEA board of directors, and they guide our advocacy in the statehouse and beyond.

Before I go, I want to give the newer members of this committee a brief introduction to who we are and what drives us.

You will see several of us in your committee throughout the course of the session. Most notably will be Don Tinney. Don is a 31-year English teacher who is serving as the president of Vermont-NEA. His work with Vermont's students focused on literacy and as such, he served on the Advisory Council on Literacy. I believe you received a copy of their December 2022 report but if you need that I can get that to you. Additionally, Colin Robinson, who many of you know, serves as Vermont-NEA's political director, and he is found most days inside the statehouse. Colin's wealth of information about Vermont-NEA makes him a trusted resource. Finally, our new general counsel, Rebecca "Becca" McBroom, will be in the statehouse this year. Becca's years of experience with education, including special education, and traditional labor law issues will send her not only to your committee but likely to other House committees.

And now here's a little bit about who we are.

### **Purpose and Priorities**

**Vermont-NEA wants all children to have an excellent education. Our purpose is to make sure our members have a satisfying work environment where they are acknowledged for the work they perform and where the work they perform helps students do their best.**

Simply put, students' learning conditions are educators' working conditions. They are inexorably intertwined and likewise, our advocacy efforts support both educators and students.

### **Organization basics**

- An affiliation of local Associations of educators (teachers and support staff) in almost all public school districts in Vermont (and more than 320 schools).
- Membership, including retired teachers and student teachers, comprises approximately 13,000 Vermont educators who belong to their local Association, Vermont-NEA, and the National Education Association.
- Structure: 20-member Board of Directors elected by membership (4 statewide Officers, 16 regional Directors) + executive director *ex officio*. 20 staff members almost entirely consisting of former teachers who train our members to bargain and administer their own collective bargaining agreements.
- Subject matter affiliates: Some 20 professional affiliation groups (such as teachers of math or English or special education) function as formal affiliates of the Association, and the Association sponsors about 20 other education organization projects and programs (such as the Scholars Bowl).
- Vermont-NEA is an affiliate of the 3-million-member National Education Association.

Thank you.