

Possible Additions to Vermont-NEA 2023-2024 Legislative Agenda

Unemployment Parity for School Support Staff

Public school support staff – paraeducators, bus drivers, food service workers, custodians, and others – provide critical support to our students. Vermont students’ ability to access their learning is directly impacted by the support they receive from the support staff who feed them, drive them, encourage them and ensure their learning environments are clean and safe. In short, our children and schools can’t function without school support staff. However, this female dominated profession has been and continues to be the lowest paid public-school employees. They are low-wage hourly employees who do not get paid during school vacations or summer months. Many work second and third jobs to make ends meet. This not only affects their ability to meet their basic needs, but it also means that there is high turnover among school support staff because they hold second jobs that may pay better and have lower stress levels, which then impacts students learning when these support staff employees take permanent positions with their “second” employers.

Added to this, for decades, public school support staff have been categorically ineligible to even apply for Unemployment Insurance (UI) when they aren’t employed by a school. The State of Vermont should change this policy and simply make public school support staff categorically eligible to apply for UI. This change wouldn’t exempt them from any other rules related to UI eligibility determination, but also wouldn’t preemptively prohibit them from applying. School support staff are critical to our public schools and, therefore, should have the opportunity to maintain some level of economic dignity when school is out to ensure they can be there when their students return.

ADD TO “Safe and Compassionate Learning Environments for All” Section

- The state should increase the availability of alternative and therapeutic placements for students who would be best served by these types of learning environments. This should be done in a way that ensures students are able to stay as close to their home district as possible, in the most cost-effective manner, while supporting smooth transitions. To that end, this is best done by supporting local school districts to build out alternative programs inside local public schools. The legislature should explore providing this support through:
 - Special tax incentives – Establish special education tax incentives for districts that build out new alternative and therapeutic programs inside their local school district.
 - Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) – Create a BOCES structure, similar to many neighboring states, that would allow collaboration across Supervisory Unions/School District to build out shared alternative and therapeutic programs to students.

Protecting Books for All

School libraries provide a critical entry point to learning and to the world for Vermont students. They are a place of exploration, creation, and growth. School librarians and all teachers work hard to ensure that

students have access to the materials they need to be successful learners. To ensure that these materials are available and protected the Legislature should:

- Require all Supervisory Unions/School Districts to have to have a robust library material selection policy and clear procedures for reconsideration of materials. The policy and procedures must affirm the importance of intellectual freedom and be guided by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read Statement, and Vermont’s Freedom to Read Statement.

Protect Students and Learning – Technology in the 21st Century

Educators use technology every day in school to support student learning. Schools and educators are constantly adapting with technology to ensure that it is being used in ways that help learning and don’t distract from it. However, technology isn’t all good. In the spring of 2023, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory about the mental health impacts of social media on young people. We also know cyber bullying is a significant issue that students experience often outside of the school setting, but it affects students’ in-school learning. We know that cell phones can be a significant distraction for students in the classroom during the school day. Not only does this distract the individual student, but it impacts their peers and their educators. The state should work to protect students’ mental health and learning by:

- Adopting common sense standards for social media companies that protect youth by adopting laws similar to those recently passed by California and Maryland.
- Require the Agency of Education to draft an in-school cell phone usage policy that creates a baseline that all Supervisory Unions/School Districts must adopt.
- Enacting policies that ensure the privacy of student and youth data from technology companies that may be used in both education and non-education settings.

Fairshare for Vermont – Ensuring the Wealthiest Vermonters Support all Vermonters

For too long Vermont’s wealthiest haven’t been paying their fair share. At a time of increasing needs related to building and maintaining infrastructure, funding schools where our students can thrive, supporting Vermont families, increasing access to healthcare and housing, and protecting our environment we must ensure that those few with the most are supporting the needs of the many. In short, we must increase taxes on the wealthiest Vermont residents to build a state that works for all of us. We believe that asking the wealthiest Vermont taxpayers to pay their fair share in taxes is crucial to increase the amount of revenue available for public goods and services that will make the state better for everyone, including the wealthy. The Legislature should pass:

- A 3% personal income tax surcharge on annual income over \$500,000
- This proposal will raise approximately \$98 million each year in state tax revenue
- The proposal will only affect the wealthiest 2% of Vermont taxpayers