

February 7, 2024

Dear Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Flor Diaz Smith and I am the chair of Washington Central Unified Union District and the President of Vermont School Boards Association.

It is my understanding that The House Education Committee and the House Human Services committee are having a joint hearing today on the topic of Afterschool programs. I see that Annie had sent an invitation to testify on our experience at Washington Central. I wanted to take advantage of the invitation and share some thoughts that cover both our district and our state as a whole.

The pandemic taught us so much! I want to start with that line to remind us of one of the main things we were reminded of is that we need to prioritize educational systems that prioritize community and common good. Our Public Schools are the center and the heart of our communities. School Districts are at the center of this work and they are governed by law and have a high level of oversight. I want to ask a simple question: What is our desired state for after school programs?

I believe that our desired state is to have more opportunities for all our kids and to meet the spirit of a mixed delivery system that maintains both school and our communities' needs, while also having accountability for the use of public dollars. We keep hearing about the joint efforts by the administration and local private sector to set up after school and summer programs through a mixed delivery system. The argument that the private sector will suffer if the funds don't go directly to them is not accurate. We have limited resources, and instead of divesting the resources out of the Education fund and away from Public Schools we should allow the LEAs to be the fiscal agent of the funding. This will guarantee that there will be accountability and transparency in the use of public funds.

We have limited resources and we should not be divesting them out of public education. Privatization of this resource will create an equity gap and we can't guarantee that all students will be served or that accommodations will be made for their needs. Accountability matters and we know that we can't enforce our discriminatory statutes on private providers. Let's help strengthen the existing programs and create opportunities for new ones through other partnerships and most importantly guarantee that ALL kids will be served, especially our kids and families that we are hoping to lift from poverty.

At Washington Central Unified Union School District we have an afterschool program in each of our schools and we are committed to providing opportunities of enrichment and also making sure that our values of equity and inclusion are a priority. These programs are run by an enterprise organization that runs independently but connected to our system. It allows us to seamlessly partner with our after school coordinator to best meet our communities' needs.

As School Districts or LEAs in the State of Vermont we have the ability to partner with external organizations, with a specific program or an individual while upholding our values of equity, inclusion, and non discriminatory practices while strengthening our communities.

Respectfully,

Flor Diaz Smith