

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education and House Human Services
FROM: Mark Tucker, Superintendent, Caledonia Central Supervisory Union
TOPIC: After School Funding
Date: February 7, 2024

I am Mark Tucker, Superintendent for Caledonia Central SU, serving seven schools in Caledonia County and northeastern Washington County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the removal of after school funds from the Education Fund to the General Fund, as part of the Budget Adjustment Act.

Let me simply state up front that afterschool programs should be connected to public schools both programmatically and through funding ties, for the following reasons:

1. The operative word in the phrase “After School Funding” is **school**. In CCSU, we have an established history of providing robust afterschool (and summer) programming across all seven schools. Our programs are NOT childcare programs; they all have an educational, or educational-enrichment element to them. This happens because we are in the education business. Education Fund monies should be used for education, not childcare.
2. Moving Education Fund money to private sector control will undoubtedly have three results.
 - a. First, it will eliminate the expectation that these programs have an educational component to them, raising the possibility that at least some of this money will be used to operate what are essentially childcare programs.
 - b. Second, redirecting State money to private organizations creates opportunities for these organizations to discriminate against our students in any of the ways that some private organizations discriminate today.
 - c. Finally, it has its most negative impact on the rural school districts by diluting the pool of available students for our programming; if families of means are able to move their child(ren) into a private program, schools in our region will be drawing from a reduced pool of students. Our experience is that when this happens the schools end up providing services to the special needs students and the students whose families cannot take advantage of opportunities beyond the bounds of their local school. This is a fundamental equity issue for these students.
3. This money was only recently added to the Education Fund in the last legislative session, ironically due, in part, to advocacy by some of the same organizations that now ask to have that money moved to the general fund. The wise decision by the Legislature last session to make more monies available for after school programming by adding tax revenue to the Education Fund ought to be seen as an acknowledgement that public schools know best how to utilize those monies to serve their students. We are just now seeing an opportunity to access those dollars through a competitive grant process that AOE has announced, with the caveat that the grant program will go away if the dollars go away. My point is that there has been no time for the schools to demonstrate their good intentions and proper use of these dollars; thus, any claim that we do not know how to do this are specious at best.
4. I know that some people are tired of hearing the word “equity.” Nonetheless, public schools are the only organized bodies in Vermont that can assure that public dollars are used for their intended purpose, without fearing that schools will fail to address the needs of *all* of their respective students regardless of financial need, student ability, race, sex, gender, etc. If we fail at any of these goals, there is an opportunity to challenge that failure because there are

oversight guidelines in place to do so. To my knowledge, there is no one positioned to oversee the use of these dollars in terms of meeting State-mandated non-discrimination laws and regulations, outside of the public school system.

5. There is an implicit risk that if you put this money in the hands of private organizations, it will naturally flow to those organizations that already exist. On its face, that may not seem to be a problem, but what usually happens in these cases is an over-concentration or over-distribution of these dollars away from rural sections of the State towards the more populated regions where we see the clustering of widely available, competing programs that can partner with public schools. In the Northeast Kingdom, there is a dearth of such organizations – no YMCAs, no Boys & Girls Clubs, etc. Our friends in Chittenden County can proudly point to the availability of organizations such as these, but there is no reason to believe that these organizations will use any of this money to expand into unserved areas of the State. If I am right – and I think I am – this reallocation of monies will simply exacerbate the gap between the haves and have-nots.
6. We are not opposed to the notion that a public school might wish to partner with an outside organization to serve the after school needs of its students. In our mind, the question boils down to, “Who should oversee these agreements?” In my experience, the best way to control behavior in the public sector is to control the money. Leaving the money in the hands of the LEAs will not prevent partnerships; it will simply mean that the LEA has a voice in how these organizations serve our students.
 - a. Case in point – Peacham School has for several years partnered with a private facility in St Johnsbury to operate its after school program. The school provides the space, and the private firm provides the staffing at a predictable, contracted cost. Where necessary, because we control the money, we can exercise some authority over how the program operates for the benefit of Peacham students. The arrangement works for both parties.
7. All of the schools that I serve have benefitted from ESSER money for the past three years to operate their respective after school programs. In FY25, we have moved the cost of these programs into local district budgets. In a couple of cases, the impact of doing this led to some teeth-gnashing, in the face of other inflationary pressures on the local budgets, but ultimately the Boards all came down on the side of meeting its students’ needs. We have been looking forward to the opportunity to compete for this after school money to provide relief to the local budgets, in FY25 and beyond. Losing this opportunity now will present a challenge for future funding of our programs at a local level. I don’t know how many districts and SUs are 21C eligible. We intended for the past two years to apply for a 21C grant to support our after school programming starting next year, following exhaustion of the ESSER funds. We were *discouraged* by AOE from filing an SU-wide 21C grant, and encouraged to only apply for one of the seven schools. I only mention this because 21C is not a funding option for CCSU next school year.
8. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our communities *expect* after school programming to be available at their school. Many of our families participate in this free programming because it is convenient, their kids are already at school, and the program staff are typically school staff who already know the kids. Given the geographic dispersion of my SU, there is zero chance that private organizations can or will stand up after school programs that will serve my students.

There is no one better suited to managing resources for after school programming than LEAs. The continual efforts by advocacy groups to take money from the Education Fund may have distinct purposes, but what they all have in common is to continue the assault on public dollars raised through education property taxes or designated to the Education Fund from other sources to serve the needs of

students in public schools. This is bad public policy writ large, and I implore you not to make this the next sad example of that assault on public education.

Thank you,
Mark Tucker, Superintendent, CCSU