

Testimony on H.874: An act relating to miscellaneous changes in education laws
Vermont Senate Education Committee
April 11, 2024

FROM: Bernice Garnett, ScD MPH, Adam and Abigail Burack Green and Gold Associate Professor of Education College of Education and Social Services University of Vermont
RE: Reactions to Community Schools Language

- My name is Bernice Garnett, I am the Adam and Abigail Burack Green and Gold Associate Professor of Education in the College of Education and Social Service at the University of Vermont. I want start by thanking you for the opportunity to come back and speak to the language related to community schools as outlined in H.874. For the past three years, I have been co-leading the Vermont Community Schools Research Practice Partnership (VT CS RPP) with my colleague from the Agency of Education, Jess DeCarolis. Jess and I have had the opportunity to co-testify and collaborate on three different community schools related testimonies this legislative session. I will direct the Senate House Education Committee to return to our previous testimonies that provide an update on 1) Act 67 CS implementation and evaluation efforts related to our collaborative University-SEA RPP work ([January 12, 2024 – Senate and House Education Committees](#)) and 2) address community schools funding and sustainability ([February 9th, 2024 – House Education Committee](#)).
- While I am honored to have the opportunity to speak about community schools, I am curious to why I am present without my CS RPP colleague, Jess DeCarolis, who has been leading the implementation of CS in Vermont. Aligning with the ethos and values of an RPP in which multiple expertise, viewpoints and stakeholders work together to bring to bear their unique and overlapping expertise, organizational positionality and skillsets, I am hoping that I can be helpful today but **I would highly encourage you all to speak directly with the AOE and Jess DeCarolis who has been administering, supporting and leading the Act 67 Community Schools grant program for the state of Vermont.** Our CS RPP meets weekly and regularly engages in collaborative research, dissemination, and technical support. I have coordinated with Jess on this testimony as CS is a program that the AOE is running and you should be hearing form the person that is running this program. I am hoping that I can convey some of the observations about community schools funding and sustainability that together we are making, but recognize the limits of my perspectives.
- I am in full agreement with the General Assembly and the “intent to continue to fund the community schools program” as outlined in H.874
- I would encourage the legislature to return to a previous draft of this bill in which the slated appropriations for continued community schools funding was \$1.9million as opposed to the current draft appropriation of \$1,000, 000.00. Reducing the appropriation will limit the ability of the AOE and our CS RPP to scale community schools across Vermont and taper our existing funded act 67 community school pilot schools.
- We have evidence from some of our Act 67 pilot schools to indicate that three years of CS funding translated into successful incorporation of all of the elements of the five pillar community schools model and institutionalization of the Community School Model into

the local budget and school board priorities, evidenced by the continued support of the Community School Coordinator at Hazen HS. Not all of our Act 67 pilot schools are resourced and organized in the same way. **Place matters. Contextual components of leadership, staffing, community characteristics, rurality, community assets and implementation readiness will impact the timeline of scalability.** Some of our Act 67 partner schools may need a longer timeline for CS funding tapering, particularly given the global and local context of the intense pressures, disruptions and instability of the CS grant period, 2021-2024, due to the COVID pandemic.

- I am a public health prevention scientist that studies and engages with implementation science, which is a discipline dedicated to understanding how and why programs and policies are implemented, (i.e. what works? under what conditions? for whom?), in order to maximize successful outcomes and contribute to the evidence base for future scalability. We know from the literature that “Full implementation of complex change efforts can take 5-10 years, with schools generally achieving partial implementation in the first 3-4 years of these efforts.” (Welner & Valladares, 2016). Therefore, it is absurd to expect that within three years our Act 67 CS pilot grant awardees would, (a) achieve student and community level outcomes associated with community schools; and (b) sustain CS through localized braiding of local funds. Implementation science outlines key factors that contribute to population benefits of effective efforts that are supported in enabling contexts. There is often an implementation gap that can undermine successful policy and program implementation where, (a) Interventions are not used as intended and with good outcomes; (b) Interventions are not sustained for a useful period of time; and (c) Interventions are not used on a scale sufficient to impact social problems (Fixsen, 2019). **Community schools are working in Vermont rural schools. Failure to sustain funding of a model that is showing promise would further erode public trust in education and governmental efficiencies and the overall morale of our Act 67 community schools. Failure to continue funding would be a harmful state level disinvestment in a model that is working and aligned with Vermont’s vision for public education.**
- Our CS RPP is focused on Act 67 implementation to understand the enabling conditions and contexts of effective CS implementation to support statewide scalability. What are effective CS implementation models in rural Vermont? **National research showcases the critical importance of trust.** Student trust in teachers and faculty trust in students and families is associated with higher implementation of CS and better student achievement gains (from Tulsa after 4 years). Examples of CS enabling contexts and implementation drivers from the national research include, (a) school based mental health implementation; and (b) relational trust. For example, In Tulsa, Oklahoma, climate of trust among students, teachers and parents was a strong predictor of achievement. By the 3rd and 4th years of implementation of full service CS in Tulsa, students at fully implemented community schools scored significantly higher than their peers in other schools on standardized math and reading tests. "Generally, the longer and more effective a community school has been operating, and the more services a student received, the better the outcomes" (Oakes, 2017). **We are seeing strong evidence of relational trust and improvements in the school climate of our Act 67 community schools, evidenced**

by staff retention, increase in student connection and belonging to school, reduction in absenteeism, and more social gatherings. In Baltimore, results related to improvements in daily attendance and chronic absenteeism emerged after 5 years of implementation. “The Baltimore results underscore the importance of allowing for sufficient time for community school programs to mature, showing that patience is key when evaluating these initiatives” (Oakes, 2017). **Systems level change takes time. Our educational policy making process, including funding decisions, should align with the necessary timelines for preventative and systemic change as outlined by national research.**

- At this point there has been minimal state level investment in Community Schools. We believe that a state level commitment to maintain, sustain, scale and support community schools is a moral imperative of the legislature given the values and goals of Act 67 outlined in 2021, which provide an organizational structure and localized braiding map for existing educational policies, like Act 77, and systems wide, community-based efforts focused on positive youth development, well-being, community resiliency and academic rigor. **The implementation context and sustainable funding context of community schools in Vermont (Act 67) needs to consider intersecting leverage points connected to other progressive educational policies that support the five pillars of Community Schools.** CS is connected to many other initiatives and bills currently being put forward. Act 67/Community Schools contributes to and extends much of the work being done across education and social service organizations (school mental health, school health, farm to school, flexible pathways/work-based learning, local wellness policies, equitable school discipline, connected literacies, MTSS)
- Similar to other federal grant programs and investments by States, **I want to underscore the importance of a multi-year commitment to community schools funding**, where the first three years is sustained funding, and the last two years of funding slowly tapers to allow for embedment within local budgets and infrastructure. Vermont has models of effective multi-year commitments and implementation support to schools, including 21C. We can also look towards other state models with recent investments in community schools, including New Mexico. There are currently 91 community schools with grant funding from NMPED. Including CS without this funding, there are an estimated 150 CS throughout NM. The NMPED CS team supports all of these community schools and all public schools (including charter schools) that wish to become a community school to support the whole child. NMPED offers community school grants: planning, implementation, and renewal. New Mexico provided state funding for community school grants administered by the New Mexico Public Education Department, including both planning and implementation. A one-year, one time planning grant of up to \$50,000 for each eligible public school. Annual implementation grants of \$150,000 each year for a period of 3 years for each eligible school. At the conclusion of the initial three-year grant period, applicants may apply for a renewal grant for one year in an amount determined by the department.
- Due to the ambitious language of Act 67 and the innovative and creative use of federal COVID relief funds, **there is national attention and investment in 1) community**

schools implementation in Vermont and 2) the CS RPP which leverages an institution of higher education and SEA partnership to evaluate, support, sustain and scale community schools. I have been successful in garnering additional support to sustain the infrastructure of our CS RPP so that we can continue to support scaling and sustainability of community schools in Vermont, leveraging the resources, students, faculty expertise/research and extension activities of the University of Vermont, realizing the goals of a University Assisted Community Schools Partnership. However, our ability to attract and secure additional funding for community schools RPP infrastructure hinges on the sustained state level funding of community schools. The state legislature must equally commit to community schools.

- The CS RPP is currently in the third year of partnership with intended long-term collaborations to sustain existing CS programs and initiatives while leveraging RPP networks and connections to integrate new and expanded academic and health support services, agencies, and programs based on emergent needs among VT community schools, students, and families. This summer we will leverage new partnerships with the Grossman school of Business at UVM **to conduct a social return on investment of the VT community school coordinators, nested within a University-SEA, state level research-practice-partnership partnership**, using two national models of CSC ROI analyses. Synthesis of cost-benefit research “suggests an excellent return on investment of up to \$15 in social value and economic benefits for every dollar spent on school based wraparound services” (Oakes, 2017). The nascent ROI literature on CS and investments in CS coordinators have calculated the benefits generated from a CS coordinator position in the form of, (a) additional revenue generated through grants secured by the leadership of a CS coordinator couched within CS model; (b) in-kind person hours of community partners/initiatives; and (c) value of leveraging partnerships under the assumption that "without the coordinating infrastructure" of a CS "many of these funds would be unavailable or far less effective in reaching students and families". We are excited to dive deeper into the ROI of the VT CS model in partnering with economics colleagues who can support additional cost-benefit analyses and look forward to modeling our methodology on the existing templates from New Mexico and Oakland cited above.
- **Community Schools are sustaining schools and communities.** We have preliminary data from our CS sites (Jason at Hazen HS spoke to this during his recent testimony) on improved attendance, increase in student enrollment and increased staff retention rates. Additionally, we are uncovering in our interviews with CS coordinators and principals that the CS model is a recruiting tool for school leadership and students, evidenced by the quote from the Principal at White River MS from Fall 2023 who recently joined the White River MS community 2 years into CS grant. *"I'm one of those people that I don't job hop. When I saw the posting for this position, it was the only thing I applied for. It was a very specific change. And that came after doing a lot of research. So, for me, one of the things that brought me to this school, a vibrant music program, a community that supports the arts. That tells me there's plenty of opportunity to grow that. But the fact that there were so many connections with the community and when I say resources, I'm not just talking money. I'm talking time, expertise, passion in talking with people, in reading board reports, seeing how they were discussing how are we interacting with the*

community. I was very interested...So, I know for at least the smallest focal point, it attracted me. It was a recruitment tool for me. Yeah. I'm thinking about a small school. And the more I learned about it, wow, that's pretty amazing. That's nothing but opportunity right there. Wow, that's possibility." – Principal, White River Valley MS

- **Community Schools offers interdisciplinary multi-level framework for increased partnerships and therefore related diversification of potential grant funding opportunities at local/state/federal levels and within structures of Institutions of Higher Education.** For example, our CS RPP was just awarded a \$300,000 Leahy Institute for Rural Partnership Grant to extend our CS RPP through strategic initiatives aligned with our Act 67 site partner communicated needs around (a) increasing student mental health support; (b) improving access to healthcare for students and families through telehealth partnerships with school health professionals and local primary care providers; and (c) exploring the ways in which CS address food insecurity through food access and food systems work. These extension areas are allowing new connections with UVM faculty in counseling, food systems, economics and the Larner College of Medicine/Vermont Child Health Improvement Program. CS RPP affiliated faculty in counseling at UVM are gearing up to apply for a USDOE school based mental health services expansion grant leveraging our CS RPP and the community schools framework. The USDOE school based mental health funding opportunity and new partnerships would not have been realized without (a) CS; and (b) the CS RPP. We are working hard to garner sustained commitment for an CS RPP institutionally at UVM, using the University Assisted Community Schools framework. We have recently received a CDS request supported by Senator Sanders to create a University Assisted Community Schools Collaborative at UVM, leveraging our long-term CS RPP with the AOE. This award will continue to support existing rural community schools, families and students, extend the impact of the community schools model across Vermont and leverage UVM resources and expertise to mutually benefit our rural community schools through (a) service-learning courses/student internships; (b) interdisciplinary applied faculty research; and (c) curricular, professional development and extension activities. Additional CS extended federal funding may be connected to USDA, CDC or SAMSHA funding priorities if we leverage our CS RPP and intentional partnership structure.
- In conclusion, based on collaboration and connection with my colleague Jess DeCarolis, we would like to reiterate and emphasize the following aspects of community schools
 - Community Schools provides a clear model for enacting VT's vision for public schools and is a proactive systems wide approach to many of the problems that the state is facing including: chronic absenteeism, educator and student well-being, educator retention, community resiliency and well-being, student mental health, increasing access to health services for rural communities. **Investment in community schools is an investment in public health primary prevention and educational equity.**
 - Community Schools has an established research base that demonstrates a return on investment from anywhere between 7.11 and 15/\$1 dollar invested.
 - Community Schools was an investment of one-time federal funds that have met their charge re: academic impact of lost instruction.

- Community Schools serves both school and community.
- Community Schools helps schools to invest local, state and non ESSER federal money more effectively.
- **Community Schools are a strength based cost-effective systems wide strategy to support students, educators and communities to flourish and offer a hopeful framework for educational equity** in comparison to the HSCP - dropout, cynical, more expensive. Community Schools as a grant is proving to be an effective program serving more than 5000 students per year for approximately \$1M/year versus the HSCP, a dropout program, serving approximately 400 students with 103 students earning a diploma through HSCP last year.
 1. If we base it on even 400 students in HSCP this = \$6,297/student; at 103 diplomas per year = \$24,453/student
 2. For CS with 5000 students at \$1M/year = \$200/student investment
- **Community schools is an umbrella framework that serves to anchor many of the goals, outcomes and programmatic threads dedicated to supporting children, youth, families and rural communities across state level committees and agencies.** Can we as a state be nimble, creative and work towards interdisciplinary partnerships to support braided funding opportunities to support local implementation of community schools through inter-agency funding mechanism that tap into multiple funding sources? Can the community schools framework serve to create system level innovations within and across out state agencies to develop innovative grant programs and funding opportunities for school communities and additional stakeholders to address and support community resiliency holistically? For example, how can we as a state recognize that community schools are not an education only endeavor and therefore cannot rely solely on education funding and investment. There are several additional state level funding mechanisms, requiring strengthening existing and supporting new inter-agency collaborations to support sustainable community schools funding and support, including Vermont Act 118: Opiate Abatement Special Fund and Opiate Settlement Advisory Committee, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Farm to School Early Childhood Capacity Building Grants, Vision Grants & Community Supported Agriculture, the Vermont Agency of Education, Tobacco Grants, Flexible Pathways Grants B.504.1, the Vermont AOE, DMH & DVHA - Options for Funding of Social Emotional Learning and School Mental Health and the Vermont Department of Labor, Work Based Learning & Training Grants.
- I hope that some of these high-level observations and reactions to the current appropriations to sustain community schools outlined in H.874 are helpful. I would implore you to speak directly with the AOE and the individual involved in leading the Act 67 community schools pilot program, Jess DeCarolis, who can speak at greater length, in much greater detail with more nuanced educational policy fluidity on the community schools funding in H.874. Thank you for your time.

Appendix A. Preliminary Outcomes (as detailed in January 12, 2024 CS testimony)

Hazen Union School:

- **50% reduction in Grade 9 absenteeism** over three years.
- **100% faculty retention** rate.
- **Staff-initiated holiday party implemented** 2024 (meaningful, as previous reports indicated a significant lack of organizational coherence and trust.)
- **Student population is maintaining** at approximately 290-300, despite demographic prediction of 250 students this year; Further, they are **attracting students** who need a more well-rounded, wrap-around, and flexible approach.
- **Approx. 140 students participate in Hazen Ski and Ride**, some of who have complete scholarships, and is almost entirely staffed by 24 community volunteers.
- **Hazen students have interacted with approximately 14 community members** this year in Fridays' Career Cafes. These cafes are opportunities for intergenerational connections, students hear about community members life experiences and learning journeys, and the relationships between school and life. About 20-25 students attend each session.

North Country Supervisory Union:

- Launched the **'Van Go' mobile arts program hosting 8 sessions/events in Troy, VT; 26 community members/families participated** over the first three events.
- Launched a Wednesday **learning series with 18 Life Skills students, who are developing nutrition and food prep skills in the NCSU Family Resource Center** with a member of UVM's EFNEP program.
- **Community engagement opportunities at two schools began**; 'Conversation and coffee' weekly office hours with guidance and family support specialist staff at Coventry Village School. Troy School purchased sets of board games island hosted community game nights.

White River SU

- One of five GENERATOR schools in VT and part of goal to develop Innovation Makerspace: <https://generatorvt.com/workforce-development/>
- Beginning in 2022, TriValley Transit, WRVSU's local public bus service adjusted their 89'er South bus schedule and added a WRVMS bus stop to serve our after school club participants so they have access and can get home to South Royalton (WRVHS), Chelsea and Tunbridge. The grant has funded this opportunity through a sponsorship with TriValley Transit. Our ridership increased from 8 weekly in October to 47 weekly riders in November and had continued to provide consistent transportation for up to 41% of our youth participating in afterschool clubs. Community Schools are creating savings when they a CSC can negotiate a bus service that also increased participation in afterschool programs.

Appendix B. Snapshot of Vermont Community Schools across the 5 Pillars



Community Schools in Action!

