

Remarks provided to the Health Care Oversight Committee

Date: September 12, 2013

Testimony provided by: Kathryn O'Neill, Program Coordinator

Thank you for this opportunity to present to you today about the work of the Student Health and Learning team at the Agency of Education (AOE). At present, the only funded and active program pertaining to substance use at the AOE is the Tobacco Use Prevention Education Program. You will see some specifics about that program in your handout.

In an effort to reduce and prevent the impacts that tobacco has on our youth, grant funding is available to Vermont school districts and supervisory unions through the Vermont Agency of Education. Recommended funding levels are made by the Vermont Tobacco Evaluation and Review Board and funds are appropriated annually by the Vermont Legislature from the Tobacco Litigation Master Settlement Funds to support these local education agencies (LEAs) in coordinating programs and implementing tobacco prevention strategies at the local level based on these Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. You can see their recommendations on the handout.

The AOE requires grantees to develop needs-based action plans addressing key strategies including: Policy, Curriculum, Instruction, Professional Development, Family and Community Involvement, tobacco-use cessation and evaluation. Some activities that an LEA may conduct using AOE grant funds include: communication and enforcement of local policies and procedures; development of local health education scope and sequence; development of local health education assessments; curriculum resources; staff and student leader professional development; local enhancement of statewide tobacco prevention media campaigns; hosting parent dialogue nights; linking students, staff and family members to cessation resources.

On the back side of your hand out you will see the formula funding allocation for each LEA (supervisory union/school district) in our state. These funds were cut by 23% overall in this fiscal year. Each LEA experienced varying levels of cuts depending upon a number of factors, not least of which is declining enrollment, since the formula for funding levels is based upon student enrollment.

That is the tobacco use prevention education program. In addition to this work, the agency of education provides guidance and expectations to schools for their classroom-based comprehensive



health education. I'd like to make mention of the statutes that guide our work in this arena and they are also included in your handout. 16 VSA 909 and 906 both define the course of study stating that all public schools, approved and recognized independent schools and even home study programs shall provide learning experiences in the minimum course of study including tobacco use, alcohol and drug abuse prevention education and comprehensive health education including the effects of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. 16 VSA 131 provides the definition for comprehensive health education which means a systematic and extensive elementary and secondary educational program designed to provide a variety of learning experiences in eleven content areas including education about alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and prescribed drugs. So it is state law that schools provide comprehensive health education at both the elementary and secondary levels. The Vermont Grade Expectations, developed by the then Department of Education, provides health educators and curriculum coordinators guidance around what students should know and be able to do in based upon the national health education standards in 6 health concept clusters: 1. Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; 2. Family, social and sexual health; 3. Mental and emotional health; 4. Nutrition and physical activity; 5. Personal health and wellness; and, 6. Violence and injury prevention. For those of you who are interested in learning more about the guidance the AOE provides to schools around ATOD, pages 43-48 provide evidence of learning in grade clusters preK-2, grades 3-4, grades 5-6, grades 7-8 and grades 9-12. The expectation of students in health education is that they learn much more than just content. They learn how to analyze influences, access valid and reliable sources of information, skillful communication, decision-making and much more.

I realize that some of you might be wondering how all this connects with your essential question to us for this testimony which is to "give an overview of our agency's intervention and prevention programs for substance abuse." In years past, the Agency of Education had much greater capacity to provide alcohol and drug abuse prevention efforts than we do today. Up until 7 years ago, the AOE had an entire division dedicated to Safe and Healthy Schools. Millions of federal dollars annually came to our state agency to implement state level work and oversee local level efforts. Virtually all that money is now gone, with the exception of tobacco litigation master settlement funding, and even that was cut this year. In years past our team included a robust substance abuse prevention program with numerous staff. Those positions no longer exist today.

Now I don't mean to harp on a negative note. In fact, the few staff that now make up the Student Health and Learning team work hard to forge interagency partnerships, leverage funds where available and appropriate and to ensure that schools' comprehensive health education curriculum and instruction are rich and strong.



We firmly believe that when students enter school healthy and learn about and practice healthy lifestyles, when each and every student has the opportunity to learn in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe, when students are actively engaged in learning and have strong connections to their schools and the broader community, and are supported by qualified caring professionals, we will see achievement gaps close, we will see improvements in graduation rates, fewer dropouts, and overall healthier young adults ready for active engaged citizenship.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today.

