

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: January 4, 2024
RE: Vermont-NEA Introductory Testimony

Thank you for inviting me to briefly talk with you about what Vermont-NEA believes is happening in Vermont's schools and how schools are responding to the needs of their students.

Before the pandemic, Vermont's public schools were the centers of their communities where generations of students learned, explored, played, and thrived. Not to brag – well, maybe just a little – our schools then and now have consistently outperformed nearly all of their peers across the country. Vermont's public schools remain the center of their communities serving all kids no matter their issues (learning and personal), wealth status, or disability. In other words, Vermont's public schools serve all students who enter the school's doors.

That didn't happen by accident. Vermonters – and this legislature – invested in their local public schools because they – and you – know how crucial a top-quality public education is to our future. For example, the GrowVT-ED program Vermont-NEA is now operating is graduating more teachers than any other institution in the state. This program uses federal ARPA funds to give current school employees the tools necessary to become licensed teachers. Last year, with Vermont-NEA support, direction, and assistance, almost 90 school employees were on their way to successfully becoming a teacher. That too didn't happen by accident and it took leadership to address Vermont's teacher shortage. While this program is having a positive effect and combined with the broader educator workforce efforts passed last year is a significant investment, make no mistake our educator workforce shortage still exists and will for years to come.

While that is a success story, there is a significant failure in another arena that is landing on schools' doorstep. Students needs have grown exponentially since the pandemic, and unmet mental health service is the most demanding issue facing schools right now. The state's mental health system collapsed during the pandemic and students in need of those services have no other place to turn but their local public school. Not surprisingly, schools have stepped up to meet that unmet need by hiring staff and contracting for mental health services. Student needs are paramount, and schools should be applauded for meeting their students' needs. By way of example, as a result of the extraordinary work of our school nurses during the pandemic, we all know that our public schools are an integral part of our public health system. The same is true for mental health services. Our schools are integral partners with health care providers and mental health agencies in assuring the social and emotional well-being of our students and their families.

As we shared with you last year, the Vermont-NEA Board of Directors, comprised of teachers and support staff from across the state, has a comprehensive legislative agenda. I won't walk through it in totality here but I will bring an updated copy soon for your perusal. The issues range from supporting our most vulnerable students through continued investment in community schools and to broad systemic healthcare reform to items related to technology in schools and needed investment in the Agency of Education. Other issues we think will come up this session will be:

- school construction
- severe and pervasive standard of proof in accusations of bullying and harassment
- pre-K implementation (this is a multi-year study committee)

The above 3 study committees will issue reports, which likely will influence your conversations. The pre-k implementation study report will be issued, I believe, next year, so that issue may wait, but the school construction and severe and pervasive study committee reports should be issued soon. Vermont-NEA has representatives on all 3 study committees, and we would welcome another invitation to meet with you to discuss these reports in greater detail.

In 2021 the legislature created the Advisory Council on Literacy ("ACL"), which just issued its second report to you. I know you've been discussing this topic, but the ACL's report, issued December 22, 2023, in summary, says the work of the ACL should continue and that the state needs to continue its support of and increase resources for the AOE to adequately address students' reading needs. The ACL further issued 10 recommendations to the AOE to improve student reading and writing skills: "Continue to develop resources to support implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction, assessment and necessary supports . . ." The entire report can be found here: [edu-legislative-report-advisory-council-on-literacy-2023.pdf](#)

Of course there are other issues that will come to the fore, but the above-listed issues are what we think will be relevant for your consideration.