

Testimony of Kate La Riviere
February 25, 2015

Thank you all for hearing this testimony today. I am only sorry that I can't be here to deliver it in person, but many of you might have seen me lurking around here last week, so just imagine that I'm here again as you listen to my story.

My name is Kate La Riviere. I have lived in Vermont almost all of my life, except for some time spent in the D.C. area to finish college and begin my working life. I started out as a publicist and, for nearly 10 years, I worked in public relations in Northern Virginia, D.C., and finally back home in Vermont where I was employed by the Lake Champlain Chamber/GBIC and Magic Hat among a few other places. The reason I have prepared these remarks, though, is because in a moment of sheer burnout as that advertising ingenue, I decided that I would throw in the 9-to-5 towel and get an easy job... like teaching. That decision was all at once the most foolish and most fabulous one I have ever made.

I am proud to live and work in Addison Northeast Supervisory Union. The "Five Towns," as we are known, is a special place with intense pride of place. Our five K-6 elementary schools are true community centers, many of whose teachers, like me, are also community members. Yet, as I have grown my participation in our local education association and become less and less of a teaching "newbie," I have become more and more aware of the issues teachers and schools in our state are facing in a slash and burn era of education funding. But, instead of talking about property taxes, I thought it might better serve everyone if I took you through a composite "day in the life" for me and, I'm sure, the lives of so many of Vermont's teachers.

Every morning, I am in my classroom by 7am--7:15 if I hit the snooze bar--to prepare for my day. This is so much more than making copies and coffee. It's about getting my head in the game. By 8am, there are 20, 11- and 12-year-olds in my classroom and I'm really not sure what the day will bring! These days, after winter growth spurts, I'm not even sure how they're all going to fit in the 612-square foot space. Thinking about this, my mind wanders to the fact that, next year, there will be five more growing bodies in my room. There goes the reading nook, I guess. It's too bad, everyone really loves that spot. A teacher's position was cut, though, so them's the breaks.

When my students arrive, I am reminded not only of the tall order of educational outcomes that are expected of our time together, but also the intensity of non-academic needs that today's learners present. Who hasn't eaten since lunch yesterday? Who slept on the floor last night because there is one bed and her four siblings got to it first? Who is thinking about how long it has been since mom left? This one that might look like she's "zoning out" is really disassociating because the volume and cramped space are tremendous stressors. What's that smell? It's the boy who has been wearing the same clothes going on four days. Who's hanging back? Why is he unusually quiet? Did she have that scratch yesterday? Is he at mom's or dad's this week? If it's dad's, that means there was a lot of yelling about math homework last night. Maybe I shouldn't have given him any?

But how is he going to learn?

It's now 8:03.

The morning is a loop of laughter and community building. The jobs of therapist, social worker, intake counselor, best friend, mom, dad, confidante, and teacher are all mine as I weave the threads of this microcosm together and try to make sure everyone feels engaged, connected, and safe. For some students, this is easier than others, but how do you help a child cultivate a sense of worth when he is 12 years-old and he can't read or write? Or an 11-year-old who, when a certain student is absent, literally has no one else in the room to connect to? It doesn't happen overnight, but it has to happen because that's my job. These young people are up against some of the wickedest things a life can dish out and there is one of me and my job is to help them feel like they have worth, power, and control... and make sure they can solve for x.

My lunch hour is usually spent working with kids or having lunch together. Some of them need to catch up on a missed assignment, some of them need another round of instruction, some of them just need someone. If you want to know what's in a teacher's lunch bag, you can surely ask, but it's a trick question. We come second, whether it's quality time spent with a student or back-to-back meetings, and the three minutes we have to eat as we juggle everyone and everything around us always result in one thing: a heaping scoop of indigestion.

While my students are attending their Unified Arts (Music, Art, PE, Library, Guidance) class, I'm likely on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) with my credit card in hand ordering books, supplies, birthday presents, or things to keep our Science program afloat. In the past two years, I have spent \$1,033.35 of my own money on supplies for my classroom--and those were just the receipts I could find! Our budgets were frozen right before the holidays, so even money that was promised to me for things like supplies and field trips simply doesn't exist anymore. It is so hard to have to tell my students that we just don't have it and there's no chance of getting it, especially when I know that, were we to have this particular supply or widget, their time here at school would be made so much more valuable. Austerity measures in schools goes beyond a "life lesson" for children and it's a reality that they shouldn't have to face, especially the children who are always told "no" or "there's not enough." School should be the one place where there is always enough and, increasingly, it isn't.

The afternoon is as jam-packed as the morning, and when my crew gets back, I need to be on fire, no matter what lousy news I just heard, no matter how hard it's going to be to teach the lesson without everything I need to do it. It's exhausting thinking up "work arounds" and yet I feel that is becoming more and more the norm. Can't the kids share a magazine? A math book? Well, of course, but the educational experience is significantly diminished when all of us are sharing one or working from a tattered Xerox copy instead of the real thing. I know I'm not alone among teachers when I think to myself, "These kids deserve more."

When the day ends, it's about 3:20pm before the students are boarded on the buses and pulling out of the parking lot. Speaking of buses, I feel like I just got hit by one! Picking away at the piles on my desk, the paperwork to fill out or file, the arrangements to be made for tomorrow, the emails and phone calls to return, the hallway meeting that turns into a marathon conversation about how much standardized testing is taking away from our writing program, not to mention the lesson materials I need to pull-together, and soon it's well after 5pm. As I start to pack up, staring into the lunch bag that I haven't touched since I retrieved a yogurt to eat on the run at 9am, a colleague knocks on my door. Here we go again! She reports that she overheard one of my students talking about how his dad punched him last night. A call to report this might mean that this kid lands in yet another foster home, but I've got to do it. The whole way home I think about that. After another round of emails, including a few texts back and forth with a parent assuring him that our math program is providing enrichment for her daughter, an incredibly gifted scholar, my head finds the pillow just before it turns into the next day.

When I get up and do it again.

Thankfully, I'm not alone because there are eight other classroom teachers, two special educators, five part-time Unified Arts instructors, and a half-dozen or so paraprofessionals who, in so many ways, call our school home. Yet, we, the first responders on the front lines in the fight against poverty, apathy, inequality, and insecurity, are constantly being yanked from our buildings, our positions cut in someone else's quest to make "education more affordable." Anyone who thinks my classroom's annual \$400 budget (the one I mentioned earlier, which is now frozen) is expensive, should probably sit in on one of my math classes really soon because there are numbers quite a lot larger than that out there, and to my mind, they don't represent investments in anything nearly so important as Vermont's kids.

"RIF-fing" teachers, closing schools, and consolidating districts will do very little other than complicate a teacher's journey to provide his or her learners--Vermont's future leaders--with the transferrable skills they will need to be a functioning part of today's world. As I close, I want to leave you with a bit of advice, a way to proceed in your daunting tasks related to helping us educators save Vermont's schools. When I was here last week, I sat in a House Education Committee meeting where funding proposals and other potential financial solutions were being presented by a member of an interest group or think tank. I had occasion to drift a bit during the discussion and my eyes kept landing on the dry-erase board adjacent to where I was standing. It looked like a list of ideas, goals, targets, and other considerations that the Committee wanted to address or keep in mind. It looked a lot like the things that we teachers talk about on a daily basis: equity, special education, assessment... It was a pretty well-rounded list, I thought, and covered a lot of hot topics. What I didn't see, even as I strained to read some of the smaller print, was any mention of students, learners, children... our kids.

As teachers, we don't have any discussion about anything without considering the implications on a student or the students in our classrooms and our building. Oftentimes,

the reason why we are stretched so thin is because children come before time, money, resources, our own health and well-being--even, sometimes, the curriculum. I want to inspire you here at Vermont's State House to do the same. Any time you have a discussion about education, please ask yourselves--and keep asking--"How is this helping our kids?" It's a guiding star that never fails to realign us as educators, no matter how stressful a situation is. Try it: Cutting budgets, eliminating teaching positions, closing community schools, reducing enrichment and special education programs... How is this helping our kids?

If you have to think too hard or finesse too much to answer that question, then I think that's your answer right there.

I've talked a lot about what it's like to be a teacher and I hope you know that it is truly all in the service of children, so please add "kids" to your list of education topics and keep Vermont's children at the heart of your policy discussions. If you do this, we will see small and mid-sized community schools staying open, buildings with appropriate teacher-to-student ratios, enough pencils and glue, invested and happy teachers, and... most importantly... invested and happy kids preparing for an invested and happy future in Vermont.

Thank you.