

Hello. I would like to begin by thanking the Vermont House and Senate Appropriations Committees for holding this hearing and taking public testimony. My name is Susan Fortier and I am the Program Director for the Meeting Waters YMCA. We run Y-ASPIRE after school programs and summer day camp programs in the Brattleboro, Bellows Falls and Springfield regions.

I would like to ask that the legislature fund the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund with an appropriation of \$2.5 million for Fiscal Year 2017. An annual appropriation of \$2.5 million would ensure all high-need communities in Vermont could get the financial support they need to make sure that children, youth, and families have access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs.

While families in our service area are fortunate to have quality, affordable programs like ours, many others do not. Across the State, families want and need access to expanded learning opportunities but these same families and children aren't able to access programs because there aren't any in their towns, or costs are prohibitive, or there are waiting lists. Even in our own programs, while we accept the State's Childcare Financial Assistance and provide scholarships to families in need from our own Reach out to Youth Fund, the combination of those resources still can't address the entire need.

Expanded Learning Opportunities are essential for working families as they provide a safe space where young people can continue their learning while their parents are working. Through increased opportunity for healthy eating and physical activity, afterschool and summer programs address the rising rates of childhood obesity. Through hands on learning opportunities they are developing 21st Century skills like STEM and addressing the achievement gap. We know that Vermont parents are on board—according to a national study in 2014, 88% of Vermont parents support public funding of afterschool.

I very much appreciate the legislature's support of education initiatives that happen in and out of school. I hope the Appropriations committees will make the financial commitment to support expanded learning opportunities for all kids in VT by allocating funds for the ELO Special Fund in FY17.

Thanks again. I am grateful for this opportunity.

Susan Fortier, Program Director
Meeting Waters YMCA