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Testimony of Christopher Halpin, Mainstream Teaching Assistant (Special Education), Essex High School, Essex Junction, Vermont/February 25, 2015

Good Day, Honorable Members of the General Assembly:

I'm Christopher Halpin, Mainstream Teaching Assistant, a member of the staff at Essex High School in Essex Junction, Vermont.

I very recently reviewed statistics related to poverty amongst students in Vermont schools. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that more than one in five students at Essex High School receives free or reduced price lunch. I shouldn't be surprised because I see the effects of poverty all around me, every school day, as it stands face to face impeding the progress of students in even in a "wealthy" school such as mine. One in five!

I looked then at other school districts and I feel as though I should have been surprised by the impoverishment of families of students at other Vermont schools . . . but why wasn't I? I'm sure you've heard the statistics many times: Commonly, in many districts, one of every two students receives free or reduced price lunch; in many districts, two of three students receives free or reduced price lunch; in many districts, THREE of FOUR students receiving free or reduced price lunch.

I didn't find statistics telling me percentages of students who are homeless. I work as a teaching assistant (a para-educator) with special ed students. I'm very highly educated and love no job more than the one I have now AND I am serving more homeless students than I have in those eight years. Just as a higher percentage of special ed students are economically disadvantaged when compared to the general population of students, I am certain that a greater percentage of special ed students are homeless when compared to the general population.

Last September, the General Assembly heard from Kreig Pinkham, Director of the Washington County Youth Services Bureau. He explained that issues experienced by a growing number of homeless youth have intensified and have become more complex in recent years. As students' teaching assistant (their para-educator), I see my students' strengths, challenges, and disabilities listed on profiles, I receive early in the semester, but I never find out whether they're homeless until I hear stories from the student that lead me to that conclusion or I hear that from the students' case managers. I'm working increasingly with homeless students and families. I grew up in Essex Junction. Sometimes these students are children of

my high school classmates! Such a struggle, A WORTHY STRUGGLE, in which I engage every day to connect my students, ESPECIALLY MY HOMELESS STUDENTS and families, to school and community, and to build support networks within both.

I have yet to meet a teenager without promise . . . no matter the situation! Every young person wants to be loved, to love, and to become a vital member of our communities! I help uncover self-worth! I help each student uncover passions for life and learning! What a struggle! And for this, I'm paid less than \$17,800 a year! Then I have to go out and compete with our students for summer work. The income eligibility for Three Square Vermont? Near \$1800/month for a household of one? That's me!

I lost my wife (my partner of thirty years) nearly sixteen months ago and I can no longer afford my home on the wages my Vermont school district pays me for this very important job! My mortgage is not even \$1000/month! What do you think? Is it a better investment to educate our students or perhaps send them to jail?

Recently, my colleagues named me the Vermont Educational Support Professional (ESP) of the Year (2014-2015) and I can't afford to come back even though my heart compels me to BECAUSE OUR COMMUNITIES NEED THE PRODUCT OF EDUCATORS' PASSIONS FOR THE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH INCREASINGLY FACED WITH INTENSE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES.

News reports of legislative debates concerning education seem to have little connection to what this educator faces EVERY DAY even at Essex High School, one of Vermont's more economically advantaged!

I wish you worked my job. I wish you could touch the lives of our homeless students. I think you would love the compelling nature of the work! You'd not like pay day, however, and you'd not like listening to the news reports of legislative debates in Montpelier that seem so disconnected from the lives of Vermont students and educators. I want YOU with ME teaching and linking our homeless students to support networks ~~they~~ help deepen and grow!

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The free and reduced lunch statistics don't lie! WE HAVE NOT THE TIME FOR AUSTERITY BUDGETS