



Students will be capable, motivated contributors to their local, national, and world communities.

Date: 3/24/16

To: Senate Education Committee

From: Dr. Brian G. Ricca

RE: Mental Health Trends in Montpelier Public Schools

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on such an important topic in education.

Vermont schools have changed dramatically in the past ten years. We are serving more and more children who have been diagnosed with mental health issues such as: developmental trauma, anxiety, depression, attachment disorders, oppositional defiant disorder and bi-polar disorder.

- Specifically in Montpelier Public Schools, we are alarmingly seeing an increase in the number of preschoolers and early elementary aged children being diagnosed with some of these mental health issues and developmental delays in social and emotional skills. The level of need for this age group has increased significantly in the five years I have served in MPS.

In January of 2014, Secretary Holcombe and Secretary Racine prepared a report on Act 68 that noted, “National studies indicate that about 20%, or 1 in 5 children and adolescents have one or more mental, emotional or behavioral disorders. Estimating the number of students who need but aren’t receiving services is challenging; however, we know that ‘the gap between the number of children who have documented mental health needs and the number who actually receive service is becoming recognized nationally as critical in terms of its impact.’ It is well documented that less than one-third of children who need services are receiving treatment.” (Lynn, 2006: Chapter 3).

- Specifically in Montpelier Public Schools, we have seen an increase in the number of students who live in homes where drug and alcohol addiction is a chronic problem.

Mental health issues impact students’ learning outcomes substantially. Students with mental health issues are generally not able to access their education for a variety of reasons. Students living in families where parents are struggling with mental health issues and substance abuse are also not available for learning. It’s difficult to focus on school and learning when your basic needs are not being met at home.

- Specifically in Montpelier Public Schools in the five years I have served as superintendent, we have seen an increase in the following due to mental health issues, leading to the inability for students to access their education:
 - Absenteeism
 - Tardiness
 - Extremes in behavior, leading to out of district placements and contracting with outside agencies for support. These are cost drivers in our special education budget.

In FY13, Vermont spent more than \$272 million in special education. That same year, more than 15% of students eligible for special education services were also eligible under the category of an emotional disturbance. Students with an emotional disability typically can also be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. In subsequent years, there have been cuts made to mental health funding, while students' mental health needs have increased and that results in the burden to address these needs being shifted to the schools and ultimately the education fund. Families covered by third party insurance are not eligible for case management, community skills integration, or crisis services when needed. Those are not covered costs. Again, this impacts a student's ability to access his or her education.

- In Montpelier Public Schools, I am saddened to report that too many young people have taken their own lives in the five years I have served as superintendent.

The emotional and mental health needs of students are not being addressed under the current system of delivery and as a result, they are unable to fully access their education.

- In the five years I have served as superintendent in Montpelier Public Schools, I have been made aware of the increase in waiting lists for children to see:
 - Child Psychiatrists
 - Individual Therapists
 - Hospital Beds for Students in Crisis
 - Some students have been required to go to New York or New Hampshire for a hospital bed
- Further, the availability of mental health resources varies across the state. This too is a zip code and equity issue.

In summary, the trends over the past five years in Montpelier Public Schools around mental health issues indicate a need for greater collaboration and cooperation between the agency of human services, the department of mental health and the agency of education. This is necessary to improve educational outcomes for all students and to ensure that all students are able to access their education in a meaningful way. The mental health needs of many students in Montpelier Public Schools are not being met adequately and the burden to meet these needs is being disproportionately shifted to schools.

We have made great strides in Montpelier Public Schools to put in place strategies and responses to some of these needs that do lower the costs associated with these needs. Mary Lundeen, Director of Student Support Services, has introduced on-going trainings, made programmatic changes, and continues to look for ways to address these needs in the future. Specifically for next year, we are hiring a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst to address behavior needs that are the result of the mental health needs of our students.

The bottom line is this: children's needs are increasing and schools are being asked to respond to these needs in a way that was not envisioned. This necessarily increases obligations and costs. In my professional opinion, responsibility and funding need to come from outside the education fund. Under this current system, property taxes and dollars from the education fund are being "asked" to pay for a broader array of supports and services.