

Investing in the Future of Education

*Prepared for the Senate Education Committee
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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee this afternoon. I will keep my comments brief so we can all get out to enjoy Vermont's fine spring weather.

My name is Lauren Curry and I am the Executive Director of the Richard E. and Deborah L. Tarrant Foundation. We are seldom participants at the Statehouse, and though I have previously addressed your colleagues in the House, this is my first appearance before the Senate Education Committee.

Over the last decade, the Tarrant Foundation has been one of Vermont's most active philanthropic agents. Our corpus is comparatively small, but we spend aggressively – investing roughly three times the resources in Vermont communities each year as a typical foundation our size.

Our largest single investment is in Vermont's education system. Since 2005 we have funded an independent team of researchers and educators at the University of Vermont to partner with teachers and school leaders around the State. Their object is to help schools provide learning opportunities that better fit who Vermont's students are, how they learn, and the world in which they live.

The technical description of the team’s approach is embedded, sustained leadership support and professional development to increase student engagement through learning that is student-centered and technology-rich. Said more plainly, we believe in engaging today’s youth, with today’s tools, for tomorrow’s jobs and society.

The Tarrant Foundation is compelled in our investment by a clear need to better serve today’s youth. In other areas of our grantmaking we see the impact of a stubborn achievement gap, and of comparatively low rates of post-secondary education and training.

We are more troubled still by the disproportionate share of these burdens borne by young Vermonters who are economically, traditionally, or geographically disadvantaged. We join Secretary Holcombe in her urging about those who fare statistically worst in our system, as she recently declared:

... one of our highest priorities as a state needs to be improving the learning of our boys who are growing up in poverty.¹

Equal to these needs, we believe, are the opportunity and strength found in Vermont schools. Our education system is among the highest performing in the country - and by some measures the world. We enjoy strong leadership, involved communities, and legislative tools like Act 77 that can facilitate crucial innovation. Committed partners including the Tarrant Foundation, the J. Warren and Lois McClure Foundation, and the Permanent Fund for Vermont’s Children help further strengthen that system and its outcomes.

UVM’s Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education has now partnered with more than a dozen schools in five counties, reaching over 5,000 students and their teachers. The Tarrant Foundation’s

¹ Nixon, Amy Ash. “SBAC Test a must for federal funding, AOE Secretary says.” *vt-digger.org* (February 19, 2015).

recent new investment in the Institute will enable it to dramatically expand its work, now on course to involve at least half the middle schools in Vermont in the coming years.

The Tarrant Foundation's continued investment in the Institute and in Vermont schools - already more than \$12M - is fueled by several factors:

1. Early research indicators. A longitudinal study is now underway, but discreet results from the Tarrant Institute's pilot sites are compelling. In one school, the Institute observed a 21.2% decrease in male student absenteeism after just one year. More meaningful still, reduced absentee rates for boys *and* girls persisted through high school - long past the active phase of their program.

Students, teachers and parents further reported improved student engagement, participation, behavior, and core academic outcomes – all harbingers of increased academic and earnings success later in life.

2. The courage and commitment demonstrated by Vermont's educators. This is intensive and transformative work, requiring teachers and school leaders to establish clear goals and new infrastructure that develop schools as innovative organizations, reflecting in our schools the same agility and dynamism demanded of organizations beyond their walls.

Every day, school leaders are guiding their teams and communities through new conversations, teachers are leaving behind established habits and curriculum, and students are encouraged to take up new responsibility as leaders in their own education.

One described what he observes, saying:

I think it's getting easier to keep [students] excited about things because we're not teaching them to use the tool anymore. They already know how to use the tool better than any of the adults or teachers could show them. So we can refocus on the content, and the information we want to get across to the students ... This year I've really seen them go farther than I could imagine.²

This is just one of countless comments we've heard from educators, students, and parents capturing the impact, vulnerability and great potential of this evolutionary journey.

3. A clear moment of opportunity. Conversations that ten years ago started with “if” – if technology should play more of a role in education, if employers would be asking for new skills in our workforce, and if schools could make fundamental changes to how they deliver learning – are now focused wholly on “how”. How teachers can get the time and support they need to innovate, how to ensure learners have access to relevant tools, and how schools can use new technology to create efficiencies and increase learning opportunities for all students.

More than 40 schools reached out to the Tarrant Institute this year to pursue what most acknowledge as the most intensive and challenging school change they have ever undertaken. The Institute sees this - and their daily experience in classrooms - as evidence of an incredibly and productively dynamic moment in Vermont's education history. As a Foundation, we see it as evidence of an investment in change that's working - an indication that schools, teachers, families and communities are ready, able and excited to move forward.

² Teacher at a Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education partner middle school.

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Next week the Tarrant Foundation will join the McClure Foundation and the Vermont Community Foundation as hosts to 45 funders from around Vermont and New England. We will gather for a day to listen to experts in the education community speak about goals, pressures, tools and opportunities they perceive in Vermont's system.

As co-convenors of that meeting, the Tarrant Foundation believes greater shared understanding of education in Vermont will give important context to arguably all philanthropic activity in the state, regardless of field of interest. We more specifically hope this will serve as an opportunity for funders to consider new ways to support Vermont learners and schools.

I think each of us here today could point to numerous examples showing that people all over Vermont - in word and deed - are aligning themselves with the notion of change: change to increase opportunity in education, change to create greater equity, and change to ensure the sustainability of our system - and our communities.

I'm proud of the Tarrant Foundation's role in fueling that momentum. I'm also grateful to those who work in Vermont's education system - and who are charged to support it - as you work carefully and with courage to ensure the greatest possible future for every Vermont child.

Thank you.

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