

## Martha Allen's Testimony to the House Education Committee

February 14, 2018

I know this bill has been through many iterations since the UVM and DMG reports were presented and we are pleased to see that the committee is slowing down to help ensure any changes are done in a way that will not adversely impact the children in schools. Before I dive into comments on the current version of the bill, I want to refer to where this conversation began, with the UVM report, specifically the section that highlights the factors influencing child count and spending. There it reads (Executive Summary, Page 4):

- *“Intensification in the nature and extent of student need has put upward pressure on the number of students identified for special education, and has increased spending on special education and related services.*
- *Increased demand and limited capacity for community-based mental health and social services has shifted responsibility for providing these services to schools. In the face of their own capacity limitations, schools have responded by either contracting with private providers or paying for students to attend special schools or programs outside the district.*
- *There is a general understanding by educators in the field that service delivery challenges associated with providing comprehensive and early support systems as well as MTSS Tier 2 supports and interventions has resulted in more students being identified for special education, to secure both the instructional resources needed as well as funding from the state’s special education reimbursement mechanism.”*

You have heard from educators and mental health clinicians across the state about the impacts of trauma on the children in our schools and their ability to learn. These messages are echoed in the UVM report. It is critical that, as you move forward, you keep in the mind the major struggles and challenges our children, their families, and our schools are facing due to poverty and opiate addiction across the state. Our educators want, and need, the capacity to support all students. Any change in how we fund and deliver special education must ensure the needs of our students, especially those with special needs, are met.

Looking to the current draft of the bill (8.1), it is good to see the committee taking a step back allowing key stakeholders to ensure that a census funding proposal moves forward in a way that will not hurt students. As you have heard from other experts, systemic change in how special education is delivered takes time and must be done with fidelity. The UVM report suggests a five-year transition, and we agree with that time frame. There are many pieces to this puzzle and it will take hard work to get everything into place. The reality is that even though many schools have implemented MTSS and PBIS, these programs look different in different districts, and the key is to do it with consistency throughout the state. It takes quality leadership in a school to provide equitable services to students in need. We should look to provide support and professional development to school leaders and educators as they undertake these changes. These folks are the actual providers of special education services and in order

for the change to take root and succeed, it must be phased-in to allow teachers and para-educators time to learn and then incorporate the change in the way in which we provide services.

I also want to point out that any move toward the recommendations of the DMG report should acknowledge that there is a nationwide shortage of special educators, and in fact in Vermont special education is the only licensing endorsement that teachers actively seek to have removed from their license. Additionally, para-educators, under the guidance of licensed special educators, continue to provide critical supports to students with some of the greatest needs, as well as provide wrap-around support to other students. Any solution must continue to include those supports for students.

I support reducing the number of working group members who will work on the implementation plan and emphasize the importance of including practitioners on the group. It is critical to the success of the implementation that those in the field buy-in to the plan. The participation of special educators will allow for practical decision-making, rather than only depending upon those looking at the system from a 10,000 foot level.

It has been mentioned time and again that the AOE must have adequate staff in order to support districts as they implement change of this magnitude. We strongly support the committee's recommendations of increasing AOE capacity.

Finally, we have concern that some school districts may find that their census block grant does not adequately cover the costs necessary to provide services to students in need, including those faced with adverse childhood experiences. The bill should include some funding flexibility for districts to meet the needs of these students, ensuring equitable services across the state.

Thank you,

Martha Allen, Vermont-NEA President