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Good afternoon, my name is Sarah Launderville and I'm the President of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR) and the Executive Director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL). I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony regarding special education funding today.

We believe that anything that takes away from serving students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and providing a free appropriate education to all students with disabilities will do a disservice to those Vermont students who need the state's support. We believe that all education funding bills, even those looking at refinancing, need to keep that in mind because it is a matter of what our overall goal is. If our goal is to only save money but not balance that with our obligations and goals for students with disabilities, it makes it really easy to be dismissive of students with disabilities and continues to perpetuate a culture in which we think of people with disabilities as not worthy of education.

We believe that the administrative savings laid out in this legislation will result in providing less services and education opportunities to students with disabilities. Our priority, as a state, should not be the people who administer the programs, but the students who need extra support in our system to provide equity in their education. We do not believe that less administrative burden will provide that equity.

We are hoping you, as legislators, take seriously the needs of these students and have a strong understanding of the makeup of a student in special education. I know you are hearing from parents of students with disabilities today and at the Vermont Center for Independent Living, we often receive calls from parents trying to access special education services for their children. These are children who need services that allow them to have an equal playing field in the classroom to their peers. Their needs are often misunderstood or undermined by people in the community thinking that they could just do more but they are somehow choosing not to, and that is a false narrative. These kiddos just want the same opportunities. That is why we have an education system that allows for equity. VCIL also hosts a Youth Transition Program where we have young people with disabilities teaching independent living skills to transition age youth. During those skill building workshops, we are able to have rich dialogues with students who have disabilities about how they feel and how they are treated by their peers. We see firsthand how strong special education supports allow for students with disabilities to become transitioned adults who are able to attend college and find competitive employment. In the years we were not providing that strong foundation as a state, we were still institutionalizing students with disabilities and our highest expectation for them was to enter into a sheltered workshop and not seek out competitive employment.

We have read the UVM report "Study of Vermont State Funding for Special Education." We appreciate the time that went into this report and the recommendations. When I read the report and then the proposed legislation, I was concerned about the disconnect of how moving to a census based model – and reimbursement for "extraordinary special education" – matched with the full recommendations.

A few highlighted concerns are:

- Across the state, education as a whole is offered in different ways, as are special education services. Not all schools have the same commitment to best practice models like MTSS and PBiS. Not all schools commit the same amount of resources to these best practices. In addition, not all regions have the same connections with community supports that help provide holistic supports, like groups that work with people with disabilities or local designated agencies that support mental health issues. Schools struggle with strong supports from the Vermont Department for Children and Families when asking for help. We must consider all the people involved that make a strong, safe and equitable school system. If we look at special education services and financing in isolation and do not consider these other important parts of the system, we will be doing a great disservice. Addressing the funding levels without addressing how the local system will change is deeply concerning to members of our coalition.

This is laid out in the Kolbe report where it says:

> existing funding is necessary given current practices; *simply reducing spending would likely result in children going unserved and localities not meeting their obligations under federal and state law.* The report goes on to say*; To achieve savings without potential harmful impacts for students, a move to a census-based funding mechanism must be tightly coupled with shifts in practice and service delivery models. As practices shift, cost can come down while services stay the same or actually improve and expand. To do so, however, it will take time, planning and technical assistance to modify practices in ways that result in identified cost savings.*

- The VCDR membership is also concerned about how this funding model has played out in other states. You heard testimony from the Vermont Family Network, who reached out to their counterpart in New Jersey. Since Act 60, the state of Vermont has made a commitment to special education at the state level. If that cost is reduced over time, it means that either local entities may have to pick up the additional cost if savings are not realized, or services to individuals with disabilities will be reduced. Special education is for an individual's right to have an individual education plan that allows for equity in education. VCDR member organizations have worked with families and students over the years when local communities turn against the family with a disability because they blame the young person with a disability for their taxes increasing. This is the harsh reality that families face. They are often ostracized by their community in a time when they need additional support. Some families are faced with lawyers across the table from them when they are seeking an education for their child. The power differential is awful. I hope as legislators, you see it in your job to ensure that families that include children with disabilities are not further oppressed in this state.

- VCDR is also opposed to a State Board that makes decisions about spending dollars in special education that does not include people with disabilities and family members. The process of not including those most affected by special education makes it very easy to look at dollars instead of people. In addition, this legislation allows for no appeal rights. So, basically someone with a disability has a need that will help them be provided the education that the federal law mandates and then a board of people not connected to the community or that student will decide what is best for that student and that decision is final and that student, community, school and parent does not have any rights to appeal. In addition, we are concerned that this process will not meet the students' need in a timely manner. VCDR is opposed to that moving forward.

- Members of VCDR are opposed to any funding model that reduces and does not take careful consideration into the real costs of special education or inflation over time.

- We are opposed to this bill moving forward without real dialogue with families and students with disabilities. We support a committee discussion that has at the heart of that people with disabilities to share their experiences within the current model and what can be changed to support those individuals who need this system most.

After reading the Kolbe report, we do not believe that setting up a system that is rolled out quickly and before good, thoughtful discussions as a group outside of a legislative hearing process achieves this goal of providing equity to students with disabilities.

Earlier in my testimony I spoke about the shift when our state moved away from sheltered workshops to competitive employment. That process took many years and involved many people in a process and is seen nationally as a model that other states want to emulate. It is one thing to design a system by asking people what they think to develop a report and it is different to involve real stakeholder groups in a community dialogue about how to change a system.

We ask that you continue to seek and work with the disability community as you move forward as a committee. Thank you for allowing our testimony on this very important topic.