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TO: Chairman Sharpe and House Education Committee members
FROM: Jess DeCarolis, Division Director – Agency of Education
SUBJECT: 21st Century Community Learning Centers
DATE: January 17, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We appreciate the Committee’s interest in the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center (21CCLC) grant program. The Agency of Education is the entity that is programmatically and fiscally responsible for the 21CCLC program. You heard last week from Vermont Afterschool who received a contract from the AOE to conduct professional development and aid in the assessment of the 21CCLC programs.

As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 21CCLC dollars play a critical role in providing access and opportunity to high-quality educational programs for all students - especially those most vulnerable to the consequence of economic hardship and poverty. By legislative design, 21CCLC-funded programs target under-served students and focus on activities that promote:

- college and career readiness,
- arts and STEM exploration and problem-solving,
- academic achievement and remediation,
- civic engagement and community involvement,
- foreign language development,
- interdisciplinary applications, and the list goes on.

This 21CCLC focus on “access to a well-rounded education,” within the context of our public school system, can provide students— especially vulnerable students— with rich, creative and engaging opportunities to learn, while staving off summer learning losses and other challenges associated with limited opportunities. More importantly, by growing these programs through school-based community partnerships, out-of-school time learning can be integrated within the broader learning continuum and supported by additional district resources.

Context

The goal of the Agency of Education is to provide Vermont with the highest quality education, with the best value per dollar, in the most equitable way possible. Our implementation and program design work is framed in terms of the following decision criteria:

1. prioritize support for the most vulnerable students in the state (equity);
2. prepare students to be members of a healthy and growing Vermont economy, and;

3. develop solutions that will be affordable to implement, maintain and sustain (practicality/affordability).

Based on the above decision criteria in the face of fiscal challenges, the Agency of Education -- through responsible stewardship of 21CCLC investments -- can report the following results for FY17:

- 29 programs serving 102 school sites across all 14 counties were funded -- 34 percent of Vermont's public schools.
- 13,200 students were served -- over 17 percent of the K-12 student population -- and close to 5,900 were regular attendees.
- 23 out of 29 of those programs were based at schools that qualified under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) -- meaning that the number of students who qualified for free-or-reduced lunch (FRL) was so high these schools could offer free or reduced lunch prices to all students.
- On average, 62 percent of regular attendees are low income and 19% receive special education services
- 74 percent of 21CCLC funded sites offered enough program weeks to match or exceed the national average (up 8 percent from FY16).
- 71 percent of 21CCLC funded sites offered enough program days to meet or exceed the national average (up 2 percent from FY16).
- On 6 out of 7 student survey statements, 90 percent or more of students responded "almost always true" or "true about half of the time," including on measures such as "I am challenged in a good way" and "I feel like I matter at this program."

The above results reflect the investment of \$12.3 million dollars -- 46 percent comprised of 21CCLC grant funds and the remaining 54 percent coming from other cash sources at the local level -- and the efforts of nearly 2000 committed after-school staff and highly-qualified project directors (close to 40 percent of whom have an M.A. or higher).

Of the total federal dollars allotted to Vermont, up to 95 percent is allocated to the field. The remaining dollars are used to ensure that we support a system of continuous improvement for 21 CCLC-funded programs. This includes funding our state 21CCLC director to oversee the program and, working with contracted entities such as Vermont Afterschool, to provide high-quality professional learning and support our data collection and quality assessments. As an example, in FY17 AOE's 21C director oversaw 29 Annual Performance Report reviews, a database upgrade, and the Youth Program Quality Assessment system. Additionally, he conducted 17 site visits, participated in a three-day federal monitoring visit, participated in ESSA state plan development, oversaw our contracted professional learning series, and provided hundreds of in-person and written technical assistance. This year, on top of these duties, the director is running a new competition that, as you heard last week, is one of the largest to date. Preserving the director's time to maintain the quality and integrity of the 21CCLC system in Vermont is paramount.

To that end, given anticipated fiscal challenges at the federal, state and local level and with few exceptions, we will continue to prioritize strengthening existing systems, dual purposing existing structures and getting more value out of existing investments, rather than creating new bureaucracies, boards, organizational structures and new continuing obligations. Additionally, as you heard last week, with projected across-the-board cuts to the 21CCLC appropriation for the new year, the Agency may need to consider cost-saving measures such as reducing contracted services and redirecting those dollars to the field to invest.

Recommendations relative to H. 270

The AOE is grateful for the committee's interest in ELOs and for its work to raise attention to and elevate the importance of extended opportunities to learn. To ensure the resilience, efficiency and quality of the proposed work, as well as existing programs such as 21CCLC, AOE recommends deferring enactment until completion of a sustainability study and plan by a subcommittee of the House Education committee and JFO, which evaluates:

1. 1. Total costs associated with:
 - a. creating a new, parallel organizational and reporting structure, tasked with complex work, as specified in the proposed bill,
 - b. available general fund resources to support continued implementation in an increasingly resource constrained environment.
2. The effectiveness and efficiency of creating new parallel infrastructure and entities supported by state dollars, given evidence of existing underutilization of local assets for this purpose and given existing channels and practices for disbursing grants
3. The adequacy of existing capacity and resources at the AOE to support new unfunded mandates
4. Explore and identify ways to incentivize and/or fully leverage existing state resources and assets to efficiently expand access to ELOs without increasing costs
5. The impact of a 1-1 match on equity: do all regions have the same capacity to raise matching funds?

Evaluate the impact on the AOE of

1. Establishing and staffing another board to be supported by AOE staff and presumably with existing AOE general fund (e.g., for stipends to legislators)
2. Expanding data collection and reporting tasks that will have to be funded by the AOE and executed by the AOE, with no additional funding

3. Tasking AOE with developing and providing professional development

4. Asking AOE to support outreach to philanthropic and business communities in Vermont to pursue and accept grants or other funding from any public or private source for the ELO Special Fund, as well as managing receipt, disbursement, reporting and monitoring of those funds. (Note: “monitoring” has a specific meaning in the context of supervising use of state dollars, and we are not aware of a case where it is done by boards.)