

Good evening. My name is Cassie Willner, and I am a resident of Montpelier, Vermont. Thank you so much to the Vermont House and Senate Appropriations Committees for holding this hearing and taking public testimony.

I would like to ask that the legislature fund the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund with an appropriation of \$2.5 million for Fiscal Year 2018. An annual appropriation of \$2.5 million would ensure all high-need communities in Vermont could get the financial support they need to make sure that children, youth, and families have access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs.

Research tells us that without adequately addressing what is happening with our children and youth outside the school day and over the summer, we won't be able to make meaningful progress on critical issues affecting Vermont kids and families.

For example: the academic achievement gap in Vermont. Studies have shown that where our students fall behind is not in the classroom but outside the school day and over the summer. In fact, up to 2/3 of the academic achievement gap can be attributed to differences in summer learning opportunities.

Take into consideration working families. Over 79% of Vermont children have all available parents in the work force. For working families there is often a gap of 15-25 hours per week when parents are working and children are out of school. This gap is even bigger during the summer months and school vacation weeks—to the tune of 10 weeks when families must find quality and affordable care.

How about access to food? The snacks and suppers provided during an afterschool program may be the only healthy food a child has access to until the next school day. In summer, access to food is even more important, and summer food sites reach many more kids when they are an integral part of a summer learning program than when they are a stand-alone meal site.

We know from research and from practice, that afterschool and summer learning programs are essential to the health, well-being and future success of all of our children and youth. I appreciate the legislature's focus on some of our toughest issues and hope that you will make the financial commitment to "zap the gap" by appropriating funds for the ELO Special Fund. Thank you.