

Testimony of Eileen Illuzzi, North Country Career Center Director
to the Vermont House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
February 13, 2018

Representative Botzow, Representative Marcotte and members of the Committee on Commerce and Economic Development;

I would like to thank you for asking me to testify regarding the Appropriation and Transfers of Next Generation Funds. My name is Eileen Illuzzi and I am the director of the North Country Career Center in Newport.

The mission of the North Country Career Center is “Preparing Students for Career, College and Community”. I believe this is an accurate goal for Career and Technical Education, also known as CTE, in general. Lately, we have all had many conversations about the change from the old image of vocational education to the new CTE, as well the need for high school and adult students to attain post-secondary training through college, technical schools, adult technical education programs, registered apprenticeships or on-the-job training through an employer. Historically, Next Generation funding has been crucial in helping this happen.

In preparing for today’s testimony, I reviewed the original Next Generation Commission Report from 2006 and was somewhat saddened. The four original recommendations of the commission were to:

- 1. Integrate and coordinate the state’s economic development, workforce development, and education system, and appoint a “Champion” with the authority and accountability to ensure implementation.*
- 2. Dramatically increase state funding for postsecondary education and training (scholarships, loan repayment, and workforce development) by implementing bold, innovative financing mechanisms.*
- 3. Provide additional state funding for postsecondary education and training (scholarships, loan repayment, and workforce development grants) while developing the mechanisms in Recommendation #2.*
- 4. Raise postsecondary aspirations by markedly strengthening career awareness education beginning in elementary school. Continue exposure to careers and the need for postsecondary education and training in middle and high schools through technical education, school-to-work initiatives, internships, dual enrollment, and other efforts.*

For all of our hard work over the past eleven years, we haven’t come far enough. We do well with funding initiatives, but still lack a comprehensive workforce development system. The Next Generation funds have increased State funding for post-secondary education and training (although *dramatically* would be a stretch and *bold, innovative funding* a reach) but we lack a coordinated system that spans from middle school through post-secondary education and continuous training. I believe it is time to focus more on recommendations one and four of the original commission.

Comments on Next Generation Commission Recommendation One

While there has been progress toward integration of services, there has not been one strategy or systemic solution. The commission recommended that a “Champion be provided with the authority and accountability necessary for final development and implementation of the strategy. Either the Workforce Development Council or the Governor’s Interagency Workforce Development Committee might serve this function. It is essential to the success of the integrated strategy that one of these entities be given necessary authority for its implementation, or that a new, cabinet-level position be created to do so.” The recommendations of the S135 committee and House bill H 582 have proposed steps toward this goal. The State Workforce Development Council, led by the Chair, the Commission of Labor, and the newly appointed Executive Director, will work diligently towards this end over the next year.

Comments on Next Generation Commission Recommendation Four

While the 70x2025VT Council and others have been working to promote an increase in the number of Vermonters who attain a degree or credential of value, this effort is not enough. Too often students enter into a high school or technical center program without knowing what skills they may need to be successful in a given career. At a CTE center, much of their time is spent gaining technical skills, but also trying to catch up on academic coursework that could have been completed earlier had the student only been aware of what they would need later on. While it is important to give younger, middle school students an array of academic proficiencies, it is equally important to discuss career options with them and discover their interests, aptitudes and passions. Exposure to careers through field trips, CTE student presentations and lessons developed jointly by CTE and middle school teachers will give young students a way to experience various professions. It will also give them a realistic idea of what it is like to have a job in these professions. This is the intent of a career pathways model.

Currently, career awareness is done in some middle schools, but many students do not receive this service. Many middle schools simply do not have the capacity to do one more thing with their students. CTE staff are experts in this field and should be visiting local middle schools throughout each region to provide information and equitable opportunities to all students. At some CTE Centers this may require hiring an additional position for this outreach, while other centers will be able to reprioritize the work of existing staff to accomplish this goal.

While it is important for us to always look ahead, I believe that sometimes we need to pause and see where we have been before we forge ahead, chasing the “best” idea, without any real analysis of how the systems are performing; the ROI that can be measured and expected for investments in programs for the future. Eleven years ago we began to plan for a unified system of workforce education and training. While the proposed Next Generation allocations for 2019 provide education and training opportunities, there is nothing that addresses the issue of real systemic change. Until we commit, both financially and in policy, to support a career pathways system from middle school through post-secondary education and training, we will not develop the skilled workforce necessary for Vermont to succeed in the global economy.