

February 21, 2018

My name is Charlene Webster, and I have been given the opportunity to speak with you today about the upcoming changes to the way we fund special education in the state of Vermont. This topic is not new to me since I have been an educator for forty years, twelve of them as a special educator and literacy specialist.

Over the last forty years, there has been some very exciting advancement in brain research centered on literacy skills. Without a doubt we now know the best approaches to teaching reading, and I have been so fortunate to be able to practice these methods teaching high school students to read, for the last thirteen years.

This bill is an important bill and I hope that it succeeds at supporting growth and improvement in our delivery method for struggling learners. But here are some of my concerns. Louisa Moats, a well known Reading Specialist and researcher, wrote an article titled, Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science. I bring this up because, well, there is a science to teaching reading. Unfortunately, teaching teachers to teach reading is not an emphasis in most of our teacher programs in our higher education institutions. This bill's intent is to "enhance the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services." According to the DMG report, general education teachers do not feel equipped to support special education students. Many students end up in special education because teachers, and special general education teachers, have not been taught the science of teaching reading. The success of this bill will weigh heavily on how well our current and future teachers are trained to teach reading. If our goal is to see our special education numbers shrink, then we need to be working with higher institutions to make sure that they are delivering research based methods to our educators and potential educators. It is already very difficult to find special educators to fill our vacant positions. And our young teachers are not staying in the profession. Perhaps with better training geared toward the needs of today's students, we can keep teachers in this profession.

Another area of concern that has not been addressed in a funding bill is the growing number of students who exhibit trauma and PTSD. I have seen a big change over the last decade in the emotional status of many students. Knowing that we have an opioid epidemic in this state, and in neighboring states, I can only imagine that this is an area that will become even more challenging to our educational system as time goes on. Our partner agencies such as DCF and UCS are strapped for resources. A promise was made to increase supports for these agencies, but that has not happened. When these agencies suffer, schools suffer. We rely on them to collaborate with us to best serve our neediest population, and when they are unable to do so due to lack of resources, schools must step in, at a cost.

In conclusion I would just like to ask that you move cautiously and thoughtfully through this process. We cannot afford to lose funding in districts that are already strapped. There are many moving parts to this initiative. Each piece needs to be examined carefully to see what impact it might have on our responsibility to our children. Funding, allocation of funds, professional development, best practice, and so many more components all need to be examined carefully to ensure that the best decision and the right decisions are being made with our students' best interest at the heart of this.

Thank you for all of the time you put into serving our state. And thank you for allowing me to be a part of this process.

Sincerely,

Charlene Webster
Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union