

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony.

My name is Crista Yagjian. I live in Guilford, Vermont. I am a licensed special educator and reading specialist who has worked with elementary-aged students for over fifteen years. As part of my work, I have participated in many school initiatives and committees. I have been a standing EST(education support team) member, an active school leadership team member, and a school leader as part of our district's involvement with SWIFT (School-Wide, Integrated, Framework for Transformation).

As an educator who is constantly working to improve our MTSS systems, I have appreciated the current thinking about how a block grant could be used to better utilize our teacher expertise within a school building or in a supervisory union. Most educators I have spoken with want silos to be eliminated and want more flexibility to match student needs with teacher expertise. Having participated in MTSS and SWIFT work with a school district, creating this structure is really difficult. Within one supervisory union, creating equitable learning opportunities across schools that differ for so many reasons has been challenging. We have elementary schools with less than 100 students and schools with greater than 300 students within the same supervisory union. Some districts are consolidated, some are not. Our schools differ in the opportunities they have to access, and partner with human services supports. Some schools have a clinician in their buildings. Other schools in rural areas are not even close in terms of proximity to any human service resources. Some schools have reading specialists and behaviorists, other schools don't. Where I live, we can't even find qualified special educators and speech language pathologists to work with our children. Schools are also at such different places in their implementation of some of those best practices that are mentioned in the UVM study (again based opportunity and resources). I worry that with these many ways our schools differ, the proposed funding plan would be setting up our schools, our educators

and our children for failure. Our schools need strong AOE support, a clear implementation plan AND equitable resources available to fully create successful MTSS structures in our schools. Right now, the playing field isn't even close to being equal.

The Kolby study says, "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." The proposed bill does nothing to ensure that AOE has the necessary resources to support SUs in establishing or enhancing best practices like MTSS, or PBIS or early intervention.

In addition to my professional role, I am also parent to my son, Nate, who is nine and who has Down syndrome. Nate is curious, determined, and wanting to learn about everything. He can name every state on a US Map and can tell you the exit names from Brattleboro to Montpelier. If my kid wants to learn something, he does. Nate is unstoppable.

The nature of his disability and how it manifests itself in his little body requires many supports in order for him to learn and participate in school. He wears glasses, has a new hearing aid, wears braces for joints that pop out and uses an augmentative communication device to help him express his thinking. Despite some of the challenges gifted to him by having an extra chromosome, his desire to learn, to be part of a community and to be independent remind me of all he deserves in his education. When I see Nate with all of his determination, I simply want him to have the same opportunities that other children have, and I am so grateful for the law that entitles him to FAPE a free and appropriate public education.

Parenting a child like Nate in the school system comes with challenges too. Some educators and policy deciders have negative beliefs and biases towards individuals with developmental disabilities. We frequently

find ourselves in a position of advocating to help get Nate what he needs and is entitled to at school. While administrators are sympathetic, they also cite the constraints they experience, including lack of available resources, specialists, and flexibility with how to meet Nate's needs. I am looking to you to ensure that his school will continue to be able to provide him what he needs to learn.

If MTSS is really part of the heart of the UVM study- and this idea of matching expertise with our learners (our children) and using resources more thoughtfully and flexibly-- then the bill should reflect better how to plan for this and assure that students who are identified as needing special education are getting what they are entitled to. There has to be a structure around accountability and assurances. As a parent I worry that the conversations around the changes to extraordinary cost reimbursement will push school teams towards student IEP decisions based on funding rather than on student need.

The committee has also indicated the use of parent advocacy and litigation to ensure the formula will not violate a child's civil rights. I don't think that is the parent's job. Most parents including me could not even afford a lawyer if we were to go to due process.

A bill that is mostly focused on saving money, that doesn't really ensure that children like my son receive the education they are entitled to, that is not grounded in a clear educational vision that incentivises best practices (and provides support for those best practices in schools), that doesn't take into account the variability in our schools and resources our schools have access to, will most likely result in less success for ALL of our children. I urge you to slow down this process. Consider creating a plan for vesting educators, education finance experts, and family members with developing an implementation strategy that better reflects the findings of the UVM study. Vermont has always been a

national leader in working to provide an equitable education for our children. We can't afford to go backwards with this work.

Thank you again for listening to my testimony. I appreciate all of your dedicated work to help create equitable learning opportunities for the children in our state.