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TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Tracy Watterson and Tom Faris

TOPIC: S.261 An act relating to mitigating trauma and toxic stress during childhood by strengthening child and family resilience

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Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today about the Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports and its role as a framework for Vermont schools to address the effects of trauma and toxic stress in students.

#### INTRODUCTION

Students who experience trauma are more likely to demonstrate difficulties with learning and/or behavior in school. Such difficulties may impede participation and access to education. Educational inequities also can contribute to underlying conditions in communities that enable toxic stress to continue. Vermont's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a framework designed to maximize the learning of all students. MTSS employs a systemic approach and early intervention for academics and behavior. It is based on the belief that, with effective teaching, all students learn and can achieve high standards.

#### MTSS IN VERMONT SCHOOLS

Since 2015 Vermont Title 16 (16 V.S.A. § 2902) has required that all schools develop and maintain a tiered system of academic and behavioral supports. Properly implemented, such systems operate throughout a supervisory union, with a shared vision, well-designed structures and, appropriate resources. The framework rests on high-quality instruction and comprehensive data systems.

MTSS is designed to prevent failure rather than respond to it. It is understood that social/behavioral functioning is as important as academic performance and that the two are often related. Both require intentional, responsive instruction. If students demonstrate learning or behavioral difficulties even with high-quality first instruction, collaborative teams design targeted or intensive interventions to provide additional instruction and support while these students continue to learn in the regular classroom.

#### MTSS AND TRAUMA – MITIGATION AND PREVENTION

Supervisory unions with an effective MTSS create and support a culture of shared responsibility for students' learning and emotional well-being. The [Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#)

[Response to Intervention and Instruction \(MTSS-RTII\) Field Guide](#) states “At every level, student engagement is a critical factor educators must strive for to create a school culture that builds confidence, competence, self-regulation, and motivation.” (p.20). A systemic planned approach ensures the development of teams that have the expertise, information and, access to resources that students need when they need it.

Teaming is highly collaborative and there is an emphasis on including families. Teams share responsibility and focus on problem-solving. A wide range of student data is considered and used to plan and measure interventions and outcomes. These interventions do not remove students from their regular classes and instruction.

Professional learning for staff is intentionally designed to build expertise. This includes enhancing a teacher’s ability to differentiate classroom instruction for a wide variety of learners. It also develops teachers’ capacity to address social and behavioral learning, as well as their appreciation of the impact of students’ experiences and circumstances. Effective professional development also has the effect of opening the classroom to other teachers, sharing information and developing skill in a collegial atmosphere.

One important outcome of MTSS should be a reduction of the number of students referred and placed in special education. High-quality first instruction combined with timely targeted interventions can allow many students to learn in regular classes rather than experience failure before becoming eligible for services.

Similarly, MTSS can reduce the number of students who are subject to exclusionary discipline. The use of evidence-based practices such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Practices, and Responsive Classroom, along with trauma-informed training for staff allows adults to respond quickly, offer consistency of expectations, and positive relationships in a safe environment.

#### MTSS IN S.261

The Agency of Education (AOE) supports S.261 as currently written. The inclusion of language about trauma-sensitive programming to *16 V.S.A. §2902* in Section 16 fits with the vision of a tiered system of supports. We also endorse the changes to *16 V.S.A. §2904* in Section 17. These changes reflect current language for schools’ MTSS and continuous improvement plans.

