

Peter Langella  
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House Committee on Education Testimony

### **“A Better Life”**

My name is Peter Langella, I'm a resident of Moretown, and I would like to thank Chairman Sharpe for the opportunity to speak with you today. Please know that my views are my own, and I am not speaking on behalf of any of the organizations I work for or with.

As a librarian at Champlain Valley Union High School, one of Moretown's representatives on the Harwood Unified Union School District Board, an adjunct English Instructor at Johnson State College (soon to be Northern Vermont University), and a current Fellow with The Rowland Foundation, I believe I have a unique and multi-layered lens through which to view matters that concern education in Vermont.

The narrative Governor Scott and his staff are weaving about Vermont public schools is not the reality I live each day. I see exceptionally talented, dedicated, and passionate educators and students working together to develop a shared understanding for a better version of ourselves.

An amazing educator I know summed it up best when she asked a room of teachers and administrators at a recent event, “What is school if it's not a place where we help each student have a chance at a better life?”

This is the narrative that needs to be shared and spread. We are doing the hard iterative work needed to grow and change, and we need the chance to defend ourselves against the Governor's ever-moving targets.

Education is a serious field with experts and researchers and real data. As a librarian, I've been researching these issues through my subscription databases and journals, and I know your favorite hometown librarian would be happy to point you in the direction of the relevant studies. To start, I'd recommend resources on school consolidation from the Rural School and Community Trust, an organization that has compiled a great deal of evidence about the detrimental effects of top-down executive mandates on public schools in the 80's, 90's, and 2000's, with such themes as rural busing, school closures, and the unintended economic collapse of small towns.

We need to remember that some of our smallest schools are still some of the largest employers in our smallest towns. Schools are economic drivers for communities. The importance of those jobs can't be understated. What happens to all of the other businesses in a town when arbitrary ratios cut a portion of the workforce?

But no amount of statistics or analysis can match the power of a story, so I'd like to tell you about Alex, who was a student of mine at CVU a few years ago.

Alex's parents came to Vermont from another country, and Alex spent the first few years of his life speaking a language other than English in his home. Throughout elementary school, Alex worked with an English Language teacher and a Speech-Language Pathologist. By the time Alex reached high school, he was a fluent English speaker, but he still had reading and writing deficits. Alex then worked with a Reading Specialist, and he was placed in Humanities classes that contained embedded Special Educators and paraprofessionals. He worked hard, and by the end of 10th grade his skills were improving, and he was coming to school with added confidence.

Alex's family didn't have much money, so when he turned 16, Alex got a job restocking shelves at a big box store, and he worked after school and on weekends to earn money for his family, sometimes nearing 40 hours/week. Alex's school work suffered during this time as the daily grind took hold of his life. He'd often beg his older sister to drive him to friends houses for a little respite, as he didn't have access to a public bus line, just like most Vermonters don't. It was the bus to school, a full day of classes, the bus home, a walk to work, a walk home in the dark, sleep, repeat.

Upon the recommendation of his School Counselor and me, Alex freed up time in his schedule to do extra work with math, science, and English teachers (as well as tutors in our Learning Center), and he took advantage of his connection with me to learn how to better access the library. He put in the work necessary to finish his assignments and, yet again, improve his skills. He reached the end of that particular plateau, and, for the first time in his life, he could see the end of high school as a realistic possibility.

At CVU, we have a community-based capstone project called Graduation Challenge that all seniors must complete. Alex wanted to work with a forestry mapping service, but his work schedule was still intense, and he didn't have transportation to complete the required hours with his mentor in the field. So, many of us pitched in with rides when we could. It took Alex much longer to complete his project than it takes most students, and there were a few bumps along the way, but he passed the experience with solid performances on the final two components: a research paper, and a presentation of learning in front of a panel of faculty and community experts.

Alex graduated from high school.

You might be wondering why I decided to tell you Alex's story out of all the stories I could have told from the few thousand students I've known during my decade in the profession. There wasn't a tragedy at Alex's home; in fact, his parents were very dedicated and loving people. Alex wasn't exceptionally skilled at anything, except maybe time management by the end of his

time with us. Alex didn't break any records, good or bad. But Alex made it. And that normality is important.

It was hard work all around, but it was our work. It *is* our work.

Alex got a chance at a better life, and it was partly because of us -- his educators.

The ELL teacher and the SLP, the embedded Special Educators and Paras, the Reading Specialist, the tutors and librarians, all of us who drove him to his field work, and a conscientious and gracious group of teachers who helped him in many ways that I know of and countless ways that I don't.

We help students get a chance at a better life.

Alex graduated from college last week, and that makes me very proud. Proud of him, proud of me, proud of all of my colleagues, and proud of the school I work at. Our district, Champlain Valley School District, is one of the 11% that has a student-staff ratio above the Governor's arbitrary target, but we have the resources to help students like Alex because of our size, and we try to help every student who walks through our doors, no matter their status or privilege or lack thereof. We can't afford to lose anyone. Not one person in our building is expendable.

So think of the other 89% of districts that are being threatened with cuts. Schools that don't necessarily have all of the specialists and resources that my school does. Essential services that each student deserves no matter their status or home address.

This is about more than a funding gap. This is about more than ratios and tax rates and equalized pupils. It's about people; people like Alex. Public education needs to survive, and it's those of us on the inside who understand how to sustain it.

You shouldn't have to be born in Shelburne or Williston to have a chance at succeeding in this state.

Each of our students deserves a chance at a better life.

Thank you,  
Peter

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