

February 22, 2017

Dear members of the (House/Senate),

Thank you for hearing our statements.

Schooling is intimately connected to the society in which we live. Conditions that affect adults, affect children. Homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, incarceration, lack of health care, and other conditions caused by systemic issues are stressful to the body and mind. Children are incredibly resilient, but they are far from immune from these stressors. We see the symptoms of their conditions every day at our Vermont public schools.

I suggest that if we want to eradicate these problems, **we must continue to empower educators to teach children how to work together with a diverse group of peers, and empower them to teach students the tools with which to build a better world.** This kind of learning is not separated from content, but woven through mathematics, literature, history, and science. It is also found within morning meetings, problem-solving social issues with the whole class instead of isolating children for “bad” behavior, and other responsive classroom techniques.

Vermont legislators are already supporting many things that empower teachers to do this kind of teaching. I'd like to share two things that are already working to support this goal that I think absolutely must stay:

One: Freedom to plan and implement curricula that is connected to the lives of our students, that accurately portrays the lived experiences of people locally and globally, and that is designed to work for all of our students--including those who are challenged physically, emotionally, or otherwise.

Federally-mandated high-stakes testing has forced some US school districts to adopt canned curriculum--what some teachers call "books in boxes"--that supposedly help increase test scores. Unfortunately, these canned curricula have no relevance to our students' lived experiences. They do not accurately represent the lived experiences of most children in this country and around the world. In fact, canned curricula usually perpetuate racist and imperialist ideology, and are typically sold by for-profit companies aiming to get rich. Canned curriculum also lends itself to tracking students into so-called “ability-based groups,” and is so boring and inauthentic that many students act out in resistance. When I was teaching first grade, the time of day I had the highest incidents of disruptive behavior was during the half hour I was required to teach phonics in isolation (meaning, removed from meaningful content) out of a canned curriculum program. It was also the ONLY time of day when one of my students with learning disabilities could not participate in the lesson successfully due to sheer frustration and boredom.

When teachers are encouraged and free to plan and implement curricula that is relevant and helps students understand the world, students learn how their lives are intimately connected to the lives of others. They learn how math helps us understand data, how history helps us understand the present. They learn to solve problems together as a group. They learn how to work with and learn from one another in a diverse classroom community, just as we want them to do in the world.

In order to plan and implement this kind of curricula, we need to maintain the second thing that is already working in Vermont, and that absolutely must stay:

Two: Time and resources to collaborate with other teachers and community members, and to continue our own professional learning.

Planning relevant, authentic, and universally-designed curricula (curricula that meets the needs of all students) takes time and collegial support. Of all the wonderful things Vermont provides for public schools, professional collaboration must remain at the forefront. We have the experience in our classrooms, and we need time to share them, to learn from each other's expertise in order to help us plan curriculum that works. There is no "toolkit" for what we do, and, just as children are all unique, our classes are never identical year after year.

Vermont also provides funding for teachers to bring community members' expertise to our schools. Last year I invited Judy Dow, Abenaki artist and educator, to our school to teach children how to read the land on which they stand. We received a grant from the Vermont Arts Council, and Judy was able to work with all grade levels for a week. The children learned more about their own history than I was able to teach all year in fourth grade through their experience with Judy Dow.

Similarly, our field trips to local farms bring the meaning of food and labor to life. These kinds of experiences with our community members make learning authentic, and provide many learning entry points for children.

Finally, we must maintain Vermont's support of professional development practices, particularly those that value diversity and equity. Our district's diversity initiatives include required professional development that helps educators understand issues of diversity. When we have professional development to support our own understanding, we are better equipped to teach children how to live, work, and learn with one another and create a better world.

Thank you for listening.

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