

April 11, 2018

Hello, my name is Christy Gallese, I am the Director of Expanded Learning Opportunities for the Burlington School District. In this role, I manage the afterschool and summer programs, grades K-12, serving over 1, 800 students annually. Our mission is to foster the social and academic success of Burlington youth through quality programming in an environment that creates lasting connections with peers, adults and the community. While I am testifying from Burlington, my colleagues running afterschool programs across the state are doing much of the same work.

Afterschool and summer learning programs in Vermont are not only essential for working families, who value having a safe and supportive environment for their students to learn and thrive in, but are also exposing students to new skills, career fields and allowing them to experience their community in new and meaningful ways. In addition, we work in close partnership with school day to accelerate learning, avoid the summer slide, support students personalized learning plans and strengthen students work in the classroom.

- Afterschool and summer learning programs are also an effective prevention strategy. Studies have shown that children and youth who participate on a regular basis are less likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs, get into trouble, or engage in other risky behaviors.
- In addition to keeping kids away from drugs after school, afterschool programs build protective factors that prevent substance use disorders from occurring and can reduce risk factors that lead to misuse of substances. Afterschool programs reduce substance abuse through the development of protective or resiliency factors such as school connectedness, self-control, self-confidence, and quality peer relationships. As one of our afterschool students stated that through the program, "I learned the value of treating others the way I want to be treated."
- Quality afterschool programs also provide trauma-informed practices that offset the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Addressing the impact of ACEs and childhood trauma in turn reduces development of substance use disorders and other future health concerns. As the opioid epidemic continues to disrupt Vermont families this becomes increasingly important.

Our program is deeply invested in supporting our students social-emotional well being. Our elementary school programs are participating in a year-long social emotional learning (SEL) professional development cohort, made possible through a partnership with Vermont Afterschool Network that provides our staff with the tools needed to create a positive and supportive climate in afterschool, and to manage behaviors in a solution-focused manner.

The training has been invaluable to our staff and they have shared the following regarding its impact:

- "The SEL cohort has taught me how to help students when they are having big emotional reactions by giving me strategies that work "in the moment." I feel much more confident when a problem is happening with emotions/behaviors than I did before I started this cohort...We are working on steps to help students when they "erupt" come back to a level head with different mindfulness strategies and individualized care that we learned in the cohort."

- “The SEL professional development has helped me understand more in depth: the value of building communicative/trusting relationships, supportive conversations, validating emotions/feelings, having compassion for students and their needs/backgrounds, and, most of all making students feel safe - so that they know "we want you to be here" (at after school)..”

Afterschool is an ideal setting to teach **Social Emotional Learning** skills because it’s a place where all are welcome; youth can focus on building friendships; and programming is flexible. Research demonstrates that children and youth who regularly attend afterschool programs that utilize consistent SEL practices benefit from improved self-awareness, positive social behaviors, increased academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors. SEL in afterschool also helps build resilience, students shared that they learned the following in afterschool:

- “I learned to never give up”
- “It is hard work to get it right, but don’t give up”
- “I learned how if a lot of people work together, they can accomplish a lot.”
- “I learned that teamwork makes you smarter!”

In an ongoing effort to meet the needs of the Burlington community and families, our program works closely with the School District Homeless Liaison to support homeless children and families. Our Burlington Kids afterschool programs, operating at all of district elementary schools, reserve spaces for homeless students if the need for afterschool care arises. Regardless of program space, fees and wait lists, we work immediately with the Homeless Liaison and the family to provide same day afterschool care for children, this is a critical way that we can provide our students in crisis with a safe place and with access to healthy snacks and meals. We also work closely with our EL families, offering additional time afterschool for students to increase their language acquisition skills and collaborate with local community partners for the New Arrivals program in the summer.

There is still more work for us to do to support young people in our communities. According to a [national report in 2014](#), an estimated 22,000 youth across Vermont not in enrolled in an afterschool program would be likely to participate if a program were available in their community. Vermont also has the lowest percentage of low-income kids enrolled in afterschool and summer programs *in the entire nation*. This is not only a problem of access; it’s an issue of equity.

As afterschool is a time and place where youth can build resiliency and is a necessary support for families experiencing trauma, our request would be to include the language from H.270 in S.261. H.270 is a bill establishing a grant structure for the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund in order to ensure that high-needs communities in Vermont have access to quality afterschool programs. Passing S.261 with language added from H.270, alongside a separate appropriation to the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund in the FY19 budget, would be a chance to shape a positive agenda for Vermont’s children and families.

In closing, I hope you can see how afterschool and summer programs serve as a critical partner in supporting children and families who have experienced trauma and toxic stress and I appreciate your willingness to examine how we can help all youth in Vermont succeed.

Thank you for your consideration.