



Martha Allen's testimony to the Senate Education Committee
March 22, 2018

Thank you for allowing me to talk about H.897 today.

I – and all members of Vermont-NEA – are in public education to make a difference for kids. All kids. Teachers and paraeducators alike strive each day to provide their students with what they need so that they may learn to the best of their abilities. We are proud that Vermont's public schools are among the best in the nation and we want to continue to give all young Vermonters an excellent education. Over the past several years there has been a marked increase in the number of students with behavioral challenges driven by the opioid crisis and the ravages of poverty. Educators are struggling to find the best learning environment for these students. Many students have found themselves in the special education program because regular education teachers do not have the training necessary to meet the needs of these students.

I first want to highlight some things that we believe are positive steps. First, we hear from special educators across the state about how the volume of record keeping is taking away from their time to work with students directly. The flexibility that this bill provides will be appreciated by special education practitioners. Second, the flexibility to push support down to students who are not currently special education eligible makes sense as a general practice, as early intervention is critical.

I will say we do have some concerns. As a general statement, we do not believe that Vermont students are being over identified and that we spend too much on special education. That does not mean that practice should or shouldn't change, but to do it because of cost is a disservice to our special education students. Moving to a census block grant model for funding does raise concerns for us that some students may not receive the services they need or districts will have to raise general education dollars to cover those services. Having an adjustment for poverty to the block grant is an important step, but our concerns remain.

This bill is centered around finding cost savings in special education while at the same time providing all students with the services they require to receive an equitable education. The studies designed to find efficiencies recommend that schools hire more special education teachers and reduce the number of paraeducators. The idea of more qualified educators working with those in the most need certainly makes sense, but reality gets in the way.

We have found that some special educators are letting their endorsement lapse and they are retaining their regular education license because the challenges of being a special education teacher have become unmanageable. We also know that there is not a very large pool of special educators coming into the field. If the bill mandates more special teachers and fewer paraeducators, there will be a problem following that mandate.

Many paraeducators do not have the same level of professional training as special education teachers, but they are eager to improve their practice and would welcome the opportunity to take professional development courses. They would also welcome the opportunity to participate in the district in-service days, usually provided to only teachers.

As we look at the possibility of changing the culture and systems of the special education programs in our schools, it is evident that such a change will require a carefully planned multi-year transition. A big challenge in a transition such as this is the changing student population. More and more students are struggling with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and this has taxed the capacity of our public schools. Regular classroom teachers and paras need training to help these students. Special education departments are receiving more and more students in need of behavioral supports. The increase in students with behavior challenges due to ACEs has taxed both the regular and special education programs.

Often, children struggling with ACEs need the support of consistent, individual attention as they work on strategies that allow them to be ready to learn. Many times, that attention is given by a paraeducator. We find ourselves in a difficult position. Cutting costs means firing educators, educators who provide valuable individual attention to young Vermonters who need it most. If we want to cut costs, that means personnel cuts. But, more and more of our students need adults who will be sensitive to the needs and challenges of these students.

Thank you.