

Testimony from Thara Fuller, Director of Expanded Learning for the Windham Central Supervisory Union to the House of Representatives Committee on Education, State of Vermont

tfuller@windhamcentral.org

February 16, 2017

Address the Chair, members

Thank you to all of you. As a former teacher and a parent, I appreciate the hard work you do on behalf of our young people and our state.

I am the director of expanded learning programs at six schools in rural Windham County. A picture of these communities: one main intersection with town hall, the post office, a tiny library and the school. There might be a sidewalk for a short way near the school then it peters out at the main road. Most families live out on windy dirt roads and very few children can walk home from school. One of our biggest expenses for afterschool and summer is to run a bus so that kids can get home.

Funding is fragile for our expanded learning in Vermont

We were very lucky to be able to launch our network of programs with the federal 21C grant. But there isn't enough money for all the areas that need programs. Many areas lack the capacity to even apply. It took me six months of working Sundays to write the renewal application last year. And I can't use my 21c money for our elementary school summer camp, we call the Explorers Camp, because it pre-existed our federal grant. On Friday last week I learned that we may have to pull the plug on Explorers which serves children from at least 7 towns, including children in foster care who come the 20 miles from Brattleboro. The funding for Explorers has always been cobbled together from sources such as Medicaid and Title 1 federal funds. But both these sources have been shrinking and unless I pull a rabbit out of a hat, we are out of money.

I could paint a dire picture of what could happen if we lose the Explorers camp—children left all day unsupervised and perhaps with very little food in the cupboards because the families relied on the free breakfast and lunch provided by school and camp. But I prefer to focus on what we have the power to create instead.

Imagine the impact of robust expanded learning across the state

Imagine that Vermont established the funding for Explorers Camp and other similar programs across the state. One investment here would have simultaneous impact on

1. expanding the skilled workforce;
2. breaking the cycle of generational poverty;
3. feeding children in food insecure families;
4. slowing the epidemic of drug addiction; and
5. protecting equity in educational opportunities for all Vermonters.

To illustrate this, I ask you to picture our educational and economic systems in Vermont as a giant circuit board. The investments we make are the electrical current flowing through wires which turn on lights that represent jobs, thriving families, kids succeeding in school and going on to contribute to their communities. But we have a place where the wires are not fully connecting: Across the state working parents have to decide how to handle all those hours of out-of-school time. Can they afford to send their kids to afterschool programs? Will one parent settle for a part-time and low-paying job just because their shift ends in time to be able to pick up the kids at 2:45? My mother's caregiver did exactly that. Lorraine had to quit her manager position and take a night job so that she could pick up the kids from school. They still could not afford camp in the summer. But what if Lorraine's town had affordable afterschool and summer camp? She might choose a full-time day job with benefits and a retirement plan. She might find a job where her true talents meet a crucial need in the state. Do you see the lights coming on on our circuit board? Two lights for expanding our skilled workforce—one for the working parent and one for the children who now have access to enrichment all year long, including summer, where they do STEM projects and develop skills to compete in a global economy.

The research shows that regular participation in quality summer programs is the single most important factor in closing the achievement gap. Lorraine's children are now far more likely to stay on track in school, stay off drugs because they are well supervised and engaged, and go on to further education and good jobs. More lights coming on!

One investment in expanded learning =multiple high impact results.

My final point is this. It is understandable to say there just isn't enough money for a new investment. But where this a will there is a way. When we heard of companies about to leave Vermont, we found the money to create packages of incentives so that they would stay. Please consider this---Families are leaving our public schools and our state. This is the time to understand we have a fiscal and a moral imperative to find the means to create a quality standard of living for all our families through the power of public education. Thank you so much for listening with open minds. [end of testimony]