

My name is Dianne Clouet, and I teach at Green Street School, a K through 6th grade school in Brattleboro, Vermont. I have worked with children since I was 18, and professionally since I was 24. I've taught in NYC, and in New Hampshire, but most of my professional life as an educator has been here in Vermont, in South Royalton for 6 years and for the past 18 years in Brattleboro. I have taught early childhood courses at CCV, I've been a preschool teacher in public and private settings, and for the past 7 years I've been an enrichment teacher. I admit, I am sometimes startled by this long history as a teacher.

My long and varied experience as an educator leads me here today.

Vermont's K-12 schools are increasingly teaching children who come with social and learning problems that are the hallmark of poverty. Here is a brief example: I was recently at a "Kid Talk" at my school. At a Kid Talk a teacher presents a child she or he is concerned about, gives a profile of the concerns, and the other staff members brainstorm possible solutions. The child presented at my team meeting some weeks ago is a 5th grader with a marked writing difficulty. As the conversation progressed, it became clear that the student's increasing absenteeism was a contributing problem. However, contacting the student's mother is difficult because she only has phone access on Thursdays and Fridays when her partner isn't working, and then her phone access is spotty. The mother does not have transportation, so school meetings are not an option. Discussion of the child's affect and mood revealed the possibility of depression. However, at our school, our HCRS clinician is completely overbooked. The mom would need to be referred to an outside clinician- and then we circled back to the fact that this child's mother has no transportation to make these appointments a reality.

In many ways this is a quiet story, of a child struggling in school. Every single classroom at my school, with its free and reduced lunch rate hovering at 70%, has children struggling, and many of their profiles are not so quiet. There are a several classrooms at my school with more traumatized children than typically developing children. What are the life events that cause the trauma we see daily? Homelessness. Active addiction in

family members. Incarcerated family members. The havoc and stress that chronic poverty exacts on children and their families. Children with the profiles I am describing have, understandably, a harder time feeling safe. They tend to live more of their lives in “fight or flight” mode. It is harder for them to bring an opening listening brain to their lessons, and harder for them to maintain the persistence needed to learn the challenging material their teachers present.

How do the difficulties described here effect us as educators? We retool and reshape our lessons frequently. In our schools we maintain steady, predictable routines, and we strive to approach all students with calm and open hearts. We often leave speechless with exhaustion. We work to support each other as staff, we try to talk about what we are experiencing in constructive ways so that we can grow, so that we can get better at it.

OK, so let’s be solution oriented. What would help my school in complex cases such as the 5th grader I sketched out earlier, who serves as an example of the lives encountered daily by every member of the busy staff? An in-school social worker would help, who could go out to meet the families where they are, to help families work through the myriad layers of getting poverty assistance.

That would help. That would be expensive. Is this child highlighted in my story worth it?

As our legislators, we need you to stay next to our K-12 schools. Please continue to invest in us. We are hard at work with the core mission of America’s public schools- to help grow an educated citizenry. Stand by us. We need you.