

My name is Sara Forward, and I am the Social Emotional Learning Coordinator at Vermont Afterschool, a statewide nonprofit. Thank you for your time and efforts to hear from so many different voices.

I'd like to ask the Senate Health & Welfare committee to include a request in your budget memo to fund the Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Special Fund with an appropriation of \$2.5 million for Fiscal Year 2019. The legislature created the ELO Special Fund in 2015, but no money has yet been allocated. An appropriation of \$2.5 million would help ensure that all high-needs communities in Vermont are able to provide access to quality Expanded Learning Opportunities for their children and youth.

While access to afterschool and summer learning programs won't solve all our problems, research from across the nation, and experiences here in Vermont, tell us that without adequately addressing what is happening with our children and youth outside the school day and over the summer, we won't be able to make meaningful progress on some of the most critical issues that we face today. Consider the following:

- Afterschool and summer learning programs allow parents and family members to hold jobs and be at work. They keep children safe, provide positive adult role models, and time to build strong, healthy relationships with peers. In Vermont, 79% of children and youth ages 6-17 have all available parents in the workforce. For most families, there is a gap of 15-25 hours per week when parents are still at work and children and youth are out of school and need supervision. This need for programs is even greater during school vacation weeks and over the summer.
- Afterschool and summer learning programs engage students, offer help and remediation where needed, prevent summer learning loss, and are recognized as an essential strategy in addressing the academic achievement gap. Additionally, programs that provide afterschool and summer meals and snacks make it easier for families to make ends meet, and may be a child's only chance to access nutritious food until the next school day.
- 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
- 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.
- Finally, afterschool programs also create jobs, currently more than 5000 full and part time jobs across the state, including some of the only work experience available to high school students in VT's rural communities. Many of Vermont's quality afterschool and summer programs place a strong emphasis on building skills in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)—all skills that are important to the future of VT's workforce.

Research shows that students who are consistently involved in extracurricular activities like afterschool programs are about 70 percent more likely to go to college than those who are not. At the same time, trends over the last 15 years show a widening gap between families of means and low-income families when it comes to spending on and participation in afterschool and summer enrichment activities. With the lowest percentage of low income children participating in afterschool programs in the nation, this opportunity gap exists here in Vermont and is in danger of getting even wider.

My job at Vermont Afterschool is to support programs across the state who are working with children, youth, and families who have experienced significant trauma.

The request for \$2.5 million for the ELO Special Fund was arrived at with great care and intention and is based on two years of research by the ELO Working Group under Vermont's PreK-16 Council. The ELO Special Fund is a powerful example of a private, public partnership. Communities would be using local dollars coming from a variety of public and private sources to create their match for the ELO grant. Any funding invested in the ELO Special Fund would have real and immediate results in the communities receiving the grants. This money could be used to start programs where none currently exist creating new jobs, support for working families, healthy snacks and meals for children and youth, not to mention hours of academic enrichment and support, physical activity, adult role models, and hands on learning experiences. The funds could also be used to provide families in need with access to existing programs where program fees are a barrier to regular participation.

An investment in the ELO Special Fund in FY19 is an investment in Vermont's children, youth, and families that is research-based, leverages other dollars, addresses key state concerns, targets those most in need, and supports a working Vermont- both now and in the future. Thank you for your consideration.