

Good morning. My name is Holly Morehouse and I am the Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

I'd like to thank this Council for its strong and continued support over the past two years for increasing access to afterschool and summer learning opportunities, especially for children and youth from low-income families and in underserved areas of the state. I'm here today to share some recent work around youth rights, youth voice, and opportunity gaps.

When it comes to poverty and well-being and success, what rights are our children and youth entitled to? In October we held a Youth Summit and asked this of a group of Vermont youth and what they created in response is the youth rights document before you. This declaration of rights was developed by the group of Vermont youth ages 9 to 26 and representing a broad mix of demographics, geographic spread, and life experiences. The Youth Rights Summit was a day-long event that was carefully crafted to put youth voice front and center. The rights, the categories, the wording... all came from the youth. The only thing we edited was to correct a few minor spelling errors when we typed it up.

I wish that Warren or Jeremy who come from rural towns in southern Vermont could be here to speak to you directly. Or Savion, a middle schooler whose older sister is a student at CCV who also attended. Or some of the young high school students like Nura, who are New Americans from Winooski and Burlington. Or Alora, who at age 9 (almost), was the youngest young person in the room or Juli a VISTA in her twenties who was one of the participants representing young adults. Unfortunately, they can't all be here today; however, they created the document before you and it is my honor to be able to share it with you on their behalf. (If you look on the back of the declaration, they've all signed it for you.)

The question that framed the day was: What do you, as a young person in Vermont, need in order to be the best version of yourself? This document is their answer, their vision for what Vermont would look like if the rights of children and youth were put forward. You could argue that this is what Vermont would look like for our young people if indeed there were no childhood poverty.

The vision they present is compelling. When you look across the rights several key themes become apparent:

- **Safety.** The words "safe" or "safety" appear seven times and in almost every category. They also talk about being protected from abuse of all kinds (Home/Shelter) and living in gun-aware communities (Justice/ Equality).
- **Connections.** The rights highlight connecting to each other and to other people, adults, or community in a number of different ways. One of the most eloquent and succinct rights presented is the right to "connect to each other through technology and transportation."

- **Identity.** They state the right to explore their own identity (under Justice/Equality), choose their own identify (under Mental Health), and express themselves through feelings, speech, clothing, actions, creativity, and more (under Social Supports and Connections).
- **Voice.** In multiple places they claim the right to have a say in decisions that affect them, whether those decisions are specifically about the environment (as under Natural Environment) or more broadly as a “respected voice in making decisions that affect how they live” (under Social Supports and Connections; also comes up under Hobbies/Entertainment and under Justice/Equality).
- **Opportunity.** They present a vision where opportunity is there for all. For example, the opportunity to have important people in their lives who spend time with them (Hobbies/Entertainment). The opportunity to participate in safe recreation in the outdoors and in their communities (Natural Environment; also under Physical Health). The opportunity to explore the arts, learn about basic life skills, study self-defense, and have access to student-directed safe spaces for afterschool support and community engagement (Education and Justice/Equality).

It’s a compelling vision- one that is both honest and multidimensional in the way that it captures all the different issues and spaces that affect youth. Milton Chen used a wonderful phrase in an article a few years ago to describe the different spaces that children and youth move through. He called family and home the first space for learning. School and the formal education system the second space. And everything else, all the important time outside the school day and over the summer, where so much important learning and growth can happen.... He called this the Third Space. And research over the past decade has shown us that this third space is critical to the development of our children and youth into healthy, well-rounded adults. It also encompasses a significant amount of time when you consider: 80% of waking hours or 1000 hours per year in the classroom and 5000 in the community and with their families.

If you overlay Milton Chen’s idea of the “Third Space” with this declaration of rights you see not only where youth explicitly call out for access to self-directed afterschool spaces, but you also see programs, opportunities, and supports (e.g., being engaged in community, safe recreation outdoors, connecting to one another through technology and transportation, exploring identities, access to food, protection from abuse of all kinds, arts education, a voice in decisions that affect them). These are all things that can and should be supported by programs and opportunities in the Third Space.

And when talking about addressing poverty, this Third Space becomes critical. Data and research over the last decade have shown us that in the society in which we live today, access to afterschool and summer learning programs is not only an education, economic, and public health issue, but also essentially a social justice one. If we, as a state, are truly interested in

eliminating childhood poverty, rather than trying to only mitigate the discomforts of poverty, then we have to take into account what our children and youth are doing outside the school day and over the summer.

There is plenty of data to support this point. I could start by saying in full confidence that we are never going to make any progress on addressing the persistent academic achievement gap in Vermont if we don't look beyond the regular school day. Research tells us that where students are falling behind is not in the classroom but outside the school day and over the summer. In fact, studies show that up to 2/3 of the achievement gap is attributable to differences in learning opportunities during the summer.

I could also tell you that we're never going to make progress on the opioid epidemic in Vermont if we don't acknowledge the research that shows that the afterschool hours of 3-6pm are the peak hours for children and youth to engage in risky behaviors, experiment with alcohol and drugs, and commit crimes or be victims of crime. And that teens who do not participate in structured activities after school are nearly three times more likely to skip classes at school, experiment with drugs, and engage in sexual activity.

Even when it comes to one of the most basic necessities, healthy food, I could point out that we can't adequately address childhood hunger if we don't recognize that school lunch is often served at 11:30am or sometimes even earlier and that the healthy snacks and meals provided in an afterschool program may be the only healthy food a child has access to until the next day. In summer, access to food is even more important, and we know from state data that summer food sites reach many more kids when they are an integral part of a summer learning program than when they are a stand-alone meal site.

And finally, we have all kinds of data and information pointing to the importance of education and training beyond high school in order to build a strong, viable career and livelihood. But did you also know that studies have shown that students who are consistently involved in extracurricular activities (e.g., afterschool programs, sports, clubs, etc.) are about 70 percent more likely to go to college than kids who are only episodically involved—and roughly 400 percent more likely than kids who are not at all involved.

The data is there. This issue is cross cutting, touching on so many problems that we seek to address but sometimes I'm concerned that we're not thinking broadly enough in our answers and approaches.

Because here's the kicker... Here's what we really need to be concerned about. In the US, access to programs and opportunities outside the school day is increasingly tied to family income. 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. One study found that high income families in the US spend on average

\$9000 per year per child on out-of-school time activities. And they do so because it makes sense; they recognize the value of this time, the Third Space for learning, and how important it is to their children's future success. Well, it's important to every child's future success.

One thing that is so powerful about paying attention to the Third Space is that it gives us the opportunity to play an important and multifaceted role in the lives of young people. It also aligns with a two-generation approach to eliminating poverty by supporting the growth of capable, healthy, fully-fledged adults. Adolescence is increasingly recognized as a time for investing in health, learning, relationships, and experiences with benefits that continue across the life course. Adolescence and young adulthood is often an uncomfortable or challenging time, but one which is formative. It is a time when our adult self first emerges. It is a time when youth first start making decisions independently of parents or families, choices that can help set young people up for success or start them on more riskier paths. In addition, contrary to what scientists used to think, studies have shown that brain development continues well past the age of 6. In fact, young people experience another major developmental window for the brain from adolescence through the mid-20's, centering on the frontal lobe. This is the control center for "executive functions" such as planning, impulse control and reasoning. Adolescence and young adulthood is truly a time when we lay the foundations of future health and well-being, not just for the current generation, but also for the next.

We are incredibly grateful to the Council for your support over the last two years. And we still have work ahead of us. In response to the data and research.... In response to the declaration of youth rights brought to you today.... I'd like to ask the Council for your public and aggressive support for increasing access to programs and opportunities in the Third Space. In Vermont, more than 22,000 children and youth would be in afterschool programs this afternoon if more programs were available and accessible. At the same time, requests for funding in this year's state competition for grant funds through the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC program, which Vermont relies on heavily for creating expanded learning opportunities in many high need communities, are expected to be more than double what VT will have for available funding. The need is there. And our children and youth who do not have access to programs and opportunities that support all the categories and rights listed in this document, face numerous risks and challenges in the out-of-school time and are missing out on important opportunities to learn and grow.

The work that's been done over that last several years has shown that a state appropriation of \$2.5 million would help to ensure access to expanded learning opportunities for children and youth in all low-income, underserved areas of the state. Increasing opportunities and programs in the Third Space is a cross-cutting investment critical to our efforts to address poverty and to grow fully-fledged, capable, healthy adults who then in turn contribute to our state and citizenry and help to grow the next generation of young people.