

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: January 24, 2020

SUBJECT: Testimony on H.804

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about H.804. On behalf of the 13,000 teachers and school support staff members of Vermont-NEA we believe that H.804 will begin to address some of the most critical issues that affect students' ability to learn, families' ability to succeed and educators' ability to teach.

Over the past decade we have heard from educators across the state that they have a greater and greater number of students - especially in the earliest grades - coming to school unprepared to learn due to complex issues related to poverty, homelessness, mental health, the opioid crisis and other challenges. What we hear from our members reflects the research that demonstrates that if a child is concerned with where they will be sleeping that night, whether their family or caregivers are safe, or if they will have food over the weekend they will struggle to access learning in schools. Last April we surveyed our members about various issues impacting education in Vermont. When asked about the current problems they are most concerned about in Vermont schools ninety-three percent (93%) of educators identified the impact poverty and hunger are having on student learning. In the summer of 2017, the Generally Assembly convened the Adverse Childhood Experience Working Group of which Chair Webb was a member. The working group heard from teachers, social workers, mental health professionals, doctors, and Vermonters about the impacts of trauma on our citizens and communities. Asked at a press conference about the release of the working group report, your colleague Rep. Donahue from Northfield said, "What surprised me the most was hearing testimony from our school systems, from teachers, about the really, really dramatic changes they're seeing in the kids that are coming into the primary grades connected with the opiate crisis". Over the past six years, this committee has heard about these challenges from Superintendents, schools social workers, classroom teachers, school counselors and many others. These heart wrenching stories are hard to hear but happen every single day in every school, in every community across our state.

The reality is that our public schools may be the only safe place a child has during a day, week or year. Our public schools take every child and work incredibly hard to support them to be happy, healthy learners. Our schools currently provide so much more than what schools did 15, let alone 50 years ago. From mental health supports to washers and dryers so homeless students and families may have the dignity of clean clothing. As I am sure Rep. Conlon can speak to, this year after many years of discussion a school-based health clinic was launched at Middlebury Union High School, in partnership with Porter Medical Center becoming the 11th school-based health clinic in the state. These are just some small, but impactful, examples of what our public schools are trying to do to help all students access learning.

But the reality is that teachers and educators, try as hard as they might because of their deep commitment to the students they serve, can't also be social workers, mental health clinicians, housing advocates or any other professional with specialized training to meet the acute and systemic challenges facing our most vulnerable students and their families.

We believe that H.804 can create a path forward in Vermont to allow schools to deepen impactful and collaborative relationships with State and local agencies to have a positive impact on both students and families dealing with trauma that impacts their ability to learn and thrive.

Commonly referred to as the "Community School Model" H.804 would build upon work that is happening across the nation to address the same challenges Vermont schools and students are facing. There are approximately 5000 "community schools" across the United States that work to address the needs of the whole child which includes supporting the family. Section 3 outlines the definition of what a "Community School" means in the context of this bill. It is important to highlight that one advantage we have in Vermont is that our schools are already deeply integrated into the fabric of our towns and neighborhoods.

H.804 launches a pilot program that would allow up to 15 school districts across the state to deepen a comprehensive approach for their communities, their students and their families. The bill sets up a grant administered by the Agency of Education that qualified schools districts may apply for to conduct a community needs assessment to clarify what supports students and families need to succeed. These needs assessments will look different in every community and in order to qualify, a school must have at least 40 percent of their student qualified for free or reduced price lunch or be identified as needing improvement under ESSA. The bill would then allow these communities to apply to the AOE for a three year grant to hire a "Community Schools Director". The Community Schools Director is critical to the success of this model because it creates the leadership and capacity required to develop partnerships to meet the issues identified in the needs assessment and work with school based leadership teams on implementation. This position works to develop and leverage existing community and state resources and organizations to meet identified needs. On pages 14-16 of the bill as introduced there is a list of key components of the plan which must include integrated students supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, and family and community engagement strategies. This work must be additive and not for supports or programs already happening in the school.

Our students are struggling to access the learning they deserve because of issues beyond the walls of the classroom, but our public schools have a responsibility to those students and their families to help them succeed. We believe the pilot envisioned in H.804 will allow us to break down silos, build out creative collaboration, and support to the fullest extent possible the whole child so they can learn and thrive not just today but for a lifetime.