

MEMORANDUM

TO: House Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: March 27, 2020

Thank you for allowing me time to speak with you about Vermont’s educators and our publicly funded school system. These last two weeks have been incredible, and we are just beginning to comprehend the effects of the corona virus on our school system, Vermonter’s health, and our state’s economic health. My comments here are based upon my preliminary observations and understandings of certain aspects of the pandemic.

I’ll be brief, but I would be remiss if I didn’t inform you of the great work educators—administrators, teachers, and supports staff—are undertaking since the Governor dismissed students on March 18. You’ll be hearing from some of these teachers in a short bit, so I will be brief and allow the experts to speak. I’ll start by making sure you know everyone has stepped up to feed students by making and delivering meals and figuring out which families need food or childcare. And while the Governor has now dismissed schools through the end of the 2019-20 school year, meals will still be provided and educators will still educate Vermont’s children, albeit in a remote learning environment.

Administrators and school employees are devoted to their students and are working to do what is in their students’ best interest. Likewise, I believe the 12 communities that have yet to vote on their schools’ budgets and the 9 communities that need to re-vote their budget after not passing on Town Meeting Day will do the right thing and support their local community schools. The timing of these votes, however, may be challenging. The law currently requires the votes and re-votes to take place before July 1st, but that may be challenging given all we don’t know about the course this virus will take. It would make sense to review the law and temporarily allow school communities more time to get their budgets passed, i.e., extending the July 1 deadline before triggering the 87% of last year’s budget amount.

As for the economics of the pandemic, it isn’t pretty, as you may know—upwards of a \$40 million hole in this year’s education fund. The feds, however, may provide monies to offset the hit to the education fund. The attached NEA document outlines all of the contours of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and all of the economic supports. It is a massive package that just passed the US House today. The President said he would sign the law immediately.

As for other possible fiscal implications for the state, the unspoken concern is that if school employees don’t receive their pay, including hourly employees, the state will suffer even more stress to the unemployment system, but also to the state retirement systems. Of course, there is the teacher retirement system, but the Municipal Retirement System (VMERS) is comprised of

2/3 school employees. If these support staff employees don't get paid the VMERS system will suffer challenges. That and other reasons are why we are advocating to keep all school employees on the payroll doing tasks in the schools or remotely when possible to ensure work is done and the state suffers less financial harm.

I am happy to answer your questions, but I know you'll want to hear from the teachers who are following me. They can and will speak more thoughtfully about the successes and challenges of a remote learning environment.