

Theresa Utton-Jerman

From: Raquel Aronhime <raquel@unitedwaynwvt.org>
Sent: Monday, February 10, 2020 2:06 PM
To: Theresa Utton-Jerman
Subject: Public Comment on Governor Scott Afterschool for All proposal

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on Governor Scott's budget proposal, and in particular his proposal for the expansion of access to afterschool programs for all Vermont youth.

I'm writing as a Burlington parent of two kids who *do* have access to enrichment opportunities; as a Board Member of VT Afterschool; and as an employee on the "impact" side of United Way of Northwest Vermont. From any one of these perspectives, it is clear to me that all kids need safe places to be connected to caring adults, and that a community that doesn't ensure this for each and every child is a community that is not caring for and cultivating its most treasured resource: our children.

At United Way, we delve each day into some of the most problematic issues our community identifies—supporting families, promoting mental health, reducing substance use disorder, basic needs, and advancing employment. Having a system of equitable access to Third Space enrichment activities is an upstream strategy for almost every one of these issues. We know that these "third space" hours of 3:00-6:00 are the highest risk hours for our kids, and that young people not engaged in healthy spaces and activities where they can connect with caring adults are more likely to exhibit one or more negative behaviors and outcomes—including mental health issues and substance use, among many others. We also know that these programs allow kids access to food, homework help, academic and other enrichment in STEM or art—all factors that can decrease the disparities we see between more affluent and less affluent populations. These programs also ensure that working parents can be at work and stay engaged at work, knowing their children are safe and active.

We have seen countries with major turnarounds in their substance use rates after implementing new approaches to engaging youth—such as the systems used in Iceland and Finland. Why wait until the problems are manifesting when we have clear evidence of an upstream strategy that works? The state has already created an Afterschool for All state grant program, which last year was funded with \$600,000. Once those funds were put out to bid by VT Afterschool, they received almost \$5.5 million in requests from communities around the state. This shows the clear and urgent demand for afterschool in our state, with programs currently in existence getting high marks for quality from the people they serve. And it is primarily in rural communities—those plagued with other problems of access exacerbated by poverty, transportation and isolation, that we see the most need. We need to do right by *all* our young people, especially at a time when our population is declining and our workforce is suffering. All these issues are interconnected.

For all these reasons, I strongly support the governor's efforts and forward momentum on fully funding the Afterschool for All program. We can once again show the nation that Vermont leads the country in building a community where all youth can thrive.

Thank you,

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