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Bennington-4
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An act relating to equitable access to a high-quality education through community schools

All schools are located in a community. So what's a community school? At its simplest, it is a public school that actively partners with families and with community organizations — health and social service agencies, nonprofits, businesses, universities — to offer well-rounded and wide-ranging opportunities, resources and supports that help students succeed. And since these strategies are intentionally and specifically designed to reflect each school's particular needs — and the community assets it can harness — no two community schools look alike.

Community schools are a clearly defined model — or more accurately, a strategy — that includes four pillars:

1. Integrated student supports
2. Expanded and enriched learning opportunities
3. Significant family and community engagement
4. A collaborative leadership team

By integrated student supports, we mean things like access to medical care, dental care, mental health and resources for families, like job training or assistance with housing or nutrition.

By expanded and enriched learning, we mean opportunities beyond the classroom, like afterschool programs, summer programs, or partnerships with businesses to provide internships, volunteer opportunities, or job shadowing.

By family and community engagement, we mean things that bring families and community members into the school — programs that engage parents in the school and in their student's success, plus classes, training or social events for families and community members — and opportunities for shared leadership. The school starts to feel like a neighborhood hub, and these stronger school-home connections in turn are shown to improve student outcomes.

And finally, community schools have a collaborative leadership approach that extends beyond the administration to include families, community members and relevant local organizations.

As a newcomer to the legislature and to the House Education Committee, I first heard about community schools in July 2019 at a conference — the National Forum on Education Policy in Denver. There was an afternoon seminar on community schools, which sounded interesting. At the seminar, I learned about schools in cities like New York, Philadelphia and Miami that are

accomplishing some incredibly powerful things — truly transformational — through the community schools strategy. But I wasn't sure how it was relevant to Vermont. So I read a research report from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) on how the community school model is being applied in rural states and regions.

In the report, which gave examples from around the country, I was happy and surprised to learn that Molly Stark Elementary School in Bennington has been using many of these strategies for years. On the day that House Education chair Kate Webb and I visited in October 2019, a truck from the Vermont Foodbank was parked outside, and families were coming to fill bags with fresh produce and pick up healthy recipes. Inside, a room had been set aside for a dental chair, where local practitioners volunteer to provide basic preventive check-ups for low-income students. Molly Stark also offers summer camps in math, reading and writing for kids in all grades, and — I believe — both childcare and preK in a different wing of the building.

So the big question is, why? We hear frequently in this committee that children are arriving in school with a wide range of complex needs, stemming from poverty, hunger, housing insecurity and substance use disorder. This severely impacts their ability to learn as well as more-advantaged students — to listen, to focus, to engage — which, fundamentally, is an equity issue.

The community school strategy is a proven, data-driven approach that can help boost student attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates. It can help close the economic and racial achievement gap. And it can unlock additional funding through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, because it meets ESSA's standard of "evidence-based" approaches for eligible schools.

The bill we're introducing today is model legislation, based on Minnesota, New York and Tennessee. I'm very excited to take testimony, to learn more about this idea, and to hear how we can adapt and offer it — as a pilot program for 15 schools, districts or supervisory unions — here in Vermont.