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## **Testimony on 16 V.S.A. § 943 High School Completion Program: Response to Vermont Adult Learning**

### **Given by:**

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### **Summary:**

According to testimony provided on February 28, 2019, Vermont Adult Learning believes that the AEL assessment component of HSCP is discriminatory and violates the HSCP law.

### **High School Completion Program in Context:**

As previously noted, the passage of Act 176 in 2005 created the High School Completion Program which, along with the Adult Diploma and General Educational Development Programs, were historically housed under §1049 and §1049a in 16 V.S.A., Chapter 23, Subchapter 6. Present provisions of each of these programs can now be found in 16 V.S.A. §943 and §945 respectively (sections of the Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion Initiative). Taken together, these programs describe the state-supported pathways for adult learners to obtain a secondary credential in the Vermont State Adult Education and Literacy system.

Because the State of Vermont elected to house the High School Completion Program (HSCP) within its Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) system, it is incumbent upon the State to ensure compliance with and alignment of the state and federal AEL programs. The Agency of Education has developed and updated AEL, HSCP and Assessment policies to this end.

All students who enter the AEL system are baseline assessed to determine their education function level (EFL), to develop appropriate Personal Learning Plans (PLPs), and to measure progress. These expectations remain in place to ensure compliance with federal law (that we supplement and not supplant) and to report state performance, as well as to ensure that students receive a high-quality education that adequately prepares them to meet their post-secondary goals.

**Claim 1:** *Over the years, access to the HSCP for our most vulnerable and at-risk students has been eroded due to the increased use and rising thresholds of a minimum standardized test score as an eligibility requirement for entering the HSCP.*

### **Response 1:**

An examination of past HSCP policy manuals developed by the AOE demonstrate a consistent expectation that:

1. Students are pre-assessed to set baseline measures and to measure growth/progress;
2. The threshold for drawing down HSCP funds has been consistent (at NRS 5); and
3. A student is not prevented from developing a PLP and working toward a high school

credential if they assess below NRS 5 (i.e., it is **not** an eligibility requirement for entering the HSCP).

As an example, below are excerpted passages from the HSCP Policy Manual developed in July 2014:

**Reimbursable Services**

*While any student working toward a high school credential may be enrolled in the High School Completion Program, HSCP funding is not available for services that are funded and/or required under Adult Basic Education (ABE) grants. Learning activities outside of these ABE services may be funded under the HSCP reimbursement schedule with prior approval of the activity/ expense by the AOE (to ensure student readiness and appropriateness of activity).*

**Plan Development Reimbursement**

*Plan development reimbursement is not available for students below NRS level 5 as personalized learning plans are a funded requirement of the ABE grants.*

**Plan Management Reimbursement**

*Plan management reimbursement is not available for students below NRS level 5 as personalized learning plans are a funded requirement of the ABE grants.*

To suggest that there has been an increased use and rising threshold is factually inaccurate.

1. There has always been an expectation to baseline assess and progress assess in accordance with federal rules. Any increase in use would be related to increased compliance with existing policy.
2. The “threshold” for drawing down HSCP funds has been consistent in policy, at least since July 2014. As noted in previous testimony, in 2013 the HSCP was “moved” under the Flexible Pathways Initiative.

**Claim 2:** *This program has been touted as a proficiency-based model for the country that offers a flexible pathway to a quality high school diploma.*

**Response 2:**

The AOE is unaware of any national recognition of the HSCP program as a proficiency-based model. Since its inception it has required that a student meet the assigned high school’s graduation requirements. To date, this has generally centered on meeting the credit requirements of a high school. Only recently, as high schools have defined their PBGRs, have we begun to tackle the alignment of HSCP instruction to school’s PBGRs. Additionally, the AEL assessment system has been a reliable and valid method to communicate to high schools the education function level of AEL students pursuing a high school diploma, particularly when AEL providers must work with so many high schools with differing PBGRs.

**Claim 3:** *The standardized testing policy established by the VT AOE appears to be contrary to the new laws mandating proficiency-based education.*

**Claim 4:** *Standardized testing creates an inequity among those who are the most disadvantaged.*

**Response [to 3 and 4]:**

Standardized tests are a part of a comprehensive assessment system that provide another perspective about student learning. They are not at odds with a PBL system. Additionally, research involving controlled experiments (e.g., Pollio & Hochbein, 2015) suggests that improved standardized test performance is associated with standards-based grading, particularly among economically disadvantaged and non-White students. Proficiency-based models are complementary to standardized assessments.

**Claim 5:** *VT AOE's standardized testing policy denies students who do not meet the minimum testing threshold participation in this flexible pathway to graduation.*

**Response 5:**

Adult Education students are not denied participation in a flexible pathway. Regardless of how a student performs on their baseline assessment, AEL providers can develop robust PLPs with a student goal of earning a high school diploma. The type of services and instruction a student requires as components of that PLP determines what federal or state funds are used. As AEL providers receive state and federal grant funds to provide basic skills instruction (instruction for students testing below NRS 5), they are required to use those funds to provide that instruction.

**Claim 6:** *In the state of Vermont, standardized test scores are not used for entry into nor graduation from a public high school.*

**Response 6:**

That is correct. As stated above, this is also true for AEL students pursuing a diploma through the High School Completion Program. **Any** student receiving more than 12 hours of instruction by an AEL provider must be baseline assessed by federal rules – this is not specific to HSCP students and is a federal requirement used for federal reporting (and subsequently meeting state targets). Additionally, HSCP students must meet the assigned high school's graduation requirements which cannot be captured in three tests of reading, writing and mathematics. However, students who can perform at the ninth-grade level in reading, writing and math are much more likely to meet a school's proficiency-based graduation requirements.

**Claim 7:** *This issue has increased exponentially in the past year due to the transition of the standardized tests to a new, more rigorous format. [...] Today, this test takes over 5.5 hours and has increased in difficulty due to its focus on a more college-ready curriculum.*

**Response 7:**

It is true that the transition to the TABE 11/12 resulted in concerns regarding increased difficulty; similar concerns were raised when the GED changed. In anticipation of the potential impact of this transition, the AOE asked that providers share assessment information over the course of the year to inform any potential changes to our assessment and HSCP policies. Changes to our assessment policy require permission from our federal liaisons as well as an informed and deliberate approach – tracking student performance during this implementation year will inform our FY20 policy.

In the aggregate it is not surprising that the TABE tests of reading, writing and math may take 4 or more hours – students experience lengthy assessments in the PK-12 system and schools prepare accordingly. For this reason, we remind AEL providers of the assessment policy that permits testing to take place over a 30-day window, allowing them to space out the assessments within a reasonable and manageable timeframe to accommodate student schedules and stamina.

**Claim 8:** *For those students who have not been successful in a traditional school setting and/or do not test well, this standardized testing policy can set them up for failure once again.*

**Response 8:**

Like many standardized assessments such as the SBAC, SAT or ACT, the TABE 11/12 has guidelines on inclusive practices for test-takers and a process by which they can receive accommodations. Additionally, outside of requesting test accommodations, the TABE 11/12 offers many opportunities to support individuals who may be fearful of assessments, including reduced time constraints, paper-based or online access, and a locator to best identify which of four assessment levels to administer.