MEMORANDUM

TO: House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: April 11, 2019

SUBJECT: Testimony on S.23

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about S.23. Vermont-NEA supports S.23.

Vermont-NEA, a union that represents 13,000 teachers and school support staff in every corner of the state, has long supported increases to the minimum wage for all workers. We believe that every worker, whether they are represented by a union or not, deserves to be paid a wage that allows them to meet their basic needs. By joining other states in raising our state minimum wage to $15 per hour we will help ensure that all Vermonters are able to meet their basic needs. There are two specific points I would like to highlight.

First, school support staff – paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, food services workers – are the lowest paid school employees who provide some of the most important work supporting students. They feed them, drive them, clean up after them and support their learning in the classroom. Our students couldn't succeed but for the hard work of school support staff. The support staff that we represent do collectively bargain with their employers over their wages, hours and working conditions. The contracts our support staff members negotiate locally have a broad spectrum of starting wages, some with wages above $15 per hour and some have wages that start below that figure. In February 2018, in this committee, Professor Rebecca Givan from Rutgers University shared the results of her research on the education workforce in Vermont. In the report titled *"Women's Work? Voices of Vermont Educators"*, she wrote:

> *In Vermont, 87 percent of paraprofessional educators are women. Our data reveal that 39 percent are the primary wage earners in their household. Many expressed frustration over the widespread misconception that paraprofessionals are wives trying to pick up extra work, with the implicit assumption that this salary does not need to cover their full cost of living. Fewer than one in three paraprofessionals are able to survive on this income alone. Close to two thirds of paraprofessionals (63 percent) work an additional job during the school year. Sixty-eight percent of paraprofessionals work during the summer when school is closed, and over half of these employees (57 percent) work additional jobs both during the year and during the summer. The reality is that paraprofessionals are struggling economically, yet their schools depend on them to support essential educational needs. One paraprofessional spoke of the frustration of living with roommates in her 40s, describing it as "degrading."*

"It is assumed that paraprofessionals have a partner or are married, essentially that there is a two-person income supporting you. The low wages make it really tough to do this job and be on your own. Until I got my second job, there were some days I actually came home and went to bed hungry. I just had about enough to pay my rent."
Paraprofessional, Chittenden County

There is no doubt that S.23 will have an impact in allowing our lowest paid school employees to support themselves, their families and come to school able to support their students.

Secondly, while teachers and support staff work every day to ensure that students can succeed to their fullest potential, they know all too well that many of their students don't come prepared to learn because of the negative effects of poverty. Educators bring in extra food, they send students home with weather appropriate clothes and they connect with social workers, but at the end of the day students who go home worried about their next meal or whether they will have safe place to sleep will continue to struggle to learn. Increasing the minimum wage to $15 will work to ensure that families can meet their basic needs and all children can come to school prepared to learn, succeed and thrive to their highest potential.

Thanks for your consideration of this critical issue for Vermont's working families.