

Eric Krull

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My name is Eric Krull. I am resident of Huntington and teach English at Mt. Mansfield Union High School where i have been for 16 years and serve on the administrative team. I am also President of GMNEA, serving over 250 members of CESU.

While there will always be significant challenges and hurdles facing public education, I wish to draw the committee's attention to three key issues that educators and schools in Vermont are grappling with.

The first issue stems from the mandated shift on the part of VEHI to move all educators to high-deductible healthcare plans for 2018. In conjunction with the shift to these cost-shifting plans, most districts throughout the state also implemented Health Reimbursement Accounts, or HRAs, requiring the use of a 3rd party administrator to manage co-pays, prescription coverage and Flex spending accounts. My district began 2018 with the unmitigated disaster of a TPA that was Future Planning Associates. The transition to Datapath for the remainder of the year resulted in continuing hardship for employees attempting to reconcile unpaid bills and insure coverage of medications. As year went on, dozens of educators in my district alone faced the following challenges:

- Bills from primary care and other providers that went unpaid by the TPA
- Calls from collection agencies,
- Covering health care costs out of pocket without a clear path to reimbursement
- Problems filling prescriptions of all kinds, include those to treat serious, chronic conditions.
- Receipt of reimbursement checks without information on the service or bill that check was covering.
- In some cases TPA's OVER-reimbursed employees leading to employees owing the district money.
- Dozens of hours spent on the phone and online, attempting to recoup payment or reimbursement.

As a result, many employees, particularly our most vulnerable hourly employees,

- Were out \$1000s of dollars
- Struggled to fill needed prescriptions
- Often chose not to seek medical treatment to avoid payment or hassle

Despite my districts move to a new TPA for 2019, many of these issues remain unresolved. Despite the move to a statewide healthcare plan, the risk of these issues remains and I worry about the impact on the healthcare afforded our educators, in particular our support staff who may lack the resources and time to resolve these issues. The high-deductible plans have already created an additional "big ticket" item in regards to bargaining, where agreement now needs to be found on salary, contribution to healthcare premium AND the amount and structure of compensation related to the high-deductible. How this will play out with new statewide plans is certainly a cause for further concern and anxiety amongst educators.

The second thing I'd like to speak to relates to the work schools have been facing around the implementation of state mandated Personal Learning Plans and Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements. These mandates are well intended and have the potential, in theory, to help today's students be mindful and purposeful in preparing for their plans after high school, and insure that all students are achieving and building fundamental skills.

What is less apparent, and I would suggest is largely unknown by legislators, school boards, and the general public, is that the time and energy needed to implement these program cannot be done in the regular flow of the school year. The implementation of PLPs requires training and a structure for teachers to build meaningful relationships with students that do not hinge on content expertise. This is a good thing, but not an easy thing,

as the skill set involved to help a student set goals and reflect on learning opportunities are very different from the skills needed to teach quadratic equations or conjugate spanish verb tenses or recognize rhetorical devices in a persuasive speech.

PBGRs require even more time and resources to implement.

- They are a significant paradigm shift- graduating with proficiency rather than credits is a shift for not only teachers and schools, but students, parents, community members, even higher ed institutions used to GPAs and class ranking.
- The tracking of proficiency progress often involves new software and technology to track and report progress, requiring additional resources and training.
- A proficiency curriculum can be dramatically different from a “credit based” curriculum, again requiring time and training to modify and implement.

At the end of the day, while these recent mandates are well intended, it can be enormously challenging and frustrating for schools to find the time and resources to implement these programs to a level where they actually have a chance of accomplishing their goal.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to the growing mental health crisis our students are experiencing. We have heard about horrific events of school violence that draw national attention, and some close calls here in Vermont. An article published by PEW research cites that today’s teens see anxiety and depression as the BIGGEST concern they have for their peers. More than drug use. More than bullying. At Mt. Mansfield, the suicide of a junior boy in December has had a tangible and visceral effect on students and rendered dozens of students, boys in particular struggling to attend to their learning in even the most basic ways. The level of anxiety *expressed* by students, let alone actually experienced is far greater than it was a few short years ago and shows no signs of lessening.

I would ask for the following:

- Regulate third party administrators to give a path for recourse to those impacted by mismanagement
- recognize, while helping the public and board members to recognize, the partnership role that educators are looking to play in affecting change that is good for students.
- Implement and protect a process for existing mandates that looks to assess and modify current goals and programs in effort to insure these programs achieve what they intended.
- Seek a way to use existing state agencies to more seamlessly and comprehensively support students who have experienced trauma and wrestle with mental health.

Thank you