

Senate Committee on Education

April 21, 2020

Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA

Good afternoon. For the record, I'm Don Tinney, a high school English teacher from South Hero, here in my role as president of Vermont-NEA. I speak for our executive officers and the Vermont-NEA board of directors when I say that we could not be prouder of our nearly 13,000 members who have demonstrated herculean efforts and unwavering commitment by doing whatever has been necessary to maintain a sense of normalcy for students and their families— from preparing and delivering meals to teaching their classes in a whole new way, Vermont educators have met the challenges and have demonstrated just how valuable our public schools are to the fabric of every community.

You will hear from two practitioners who are currently in the field, so I will defer to them to provide specific details about their experiences and limit my remarks to general observations and impressions of the current situation.

First, I will state the obvious: Distance learning is much more complicated and much more challenging than almost anyone would have predicted. It looks nothing like the commercials for the University of Phoenix or Southern New Hampshire University.

We are hearing about the varying degrees of success with the implementation of the Continuity of Learning Plans. The process is going most smoothly in districts where there has been a high degree of collaboration amongst administrators, curriculum directors, teachers and support staff. In districts that did not heed the governor's call for all parties to work together in his March 27th press conference and tried to implement plans not created collaboratively, the process has not gone smoothly. In talking with my counterparts across the nation, I know that distance learning has presented similar challenges in every state. While this is a generalization, I think it is an accurate observation to say that many of our plans are overly ambitious with regard to academic expectations; with the best of intentions and an abundance of good will, our educators are simply trying to do too much within the confines of distance learning.

EdSurge, a news service owned by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), recently posted an article about the approach China took in implementing distance learning. In February, their Ministry of Education prohibited educators from introducing new material until the start of the next semester. The article also pointed out that paying close attention to the social and emotional needs of students, teachers and families is critical to building an environment that supports learning. While no one is proposing an abandonment of academic standards, I do think we need to revise some of our plans to make sure the delivery of instruction is sustainable over time.

As we move forward, making adjustments and revisions to the Continuity of Learning plans at the local level, we need to make sure that our members are at the table to provide feedback and ideas in the process. As I have mentioned in previous testimony to your committee, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires that educators be involved with the development of school improvement plans, so I maintain that we should follow the spirit of that law in making sure that educators have their voices heard in this process. The labor-management collaboration will be crucial as we move forward in planning for the re-entry of students to our school buildings.

Out of their commitment to their students, our members are working harder than ever implementing distance learning, while keeping student health and safety their top priority. While the daily schedules during the regular school year provide our students and educators with an assuring routine, they also provide boundaries around the time everyone invests in teaching and learning. I would like to include a short narrative provided by a colleague, whom I've known for over 20 years, that illustrates how those boundaries have crumbled.

Today I talked with 16 teachers in my role as a literacy instructional coach. Each of those teachers started work at 7:30 am (or earlier in some cases) and ended at 5:30 pm. so they could cook and eat dinner with their own family. After dinner tonight, they will each get back on-line to develop lessons for tomorrow. In between those hours of instruction and meetings, they responded "individually" to student questions during office hours and led their students in the right direction. They smiled with their students while holding back tears. They implored us to collectively find a way to reach those students who are not responding. They are getting in their cars to deliver books to those without internet access. Teachers are phoning their students to say hello so they know they are cared about. Each and every teacher I have the honor to know is working tirelessly to teach and provide emotional support to their students. They appreciate that parents and caregivers are doing their very best and worry about how overwhelming this is for families. This is a day in the life of a teacher during the pandemic. It is 24/7 work. It is work with a mission, done with love.

First and foremost, our educators want to maintain the human connection with their students, then do the best they can to deliver academic instruction. A great source of stress and anxiety for our teachers is when they can't connect with their students. Students who lack internet access are at a distinct disadvantage in today's world. The digital divide between children of poverty and children of privilege is only one glaring example of the socio-economic disparities that have been accentuated by this pandemic.

Now is the time for all of us to reflect upon our entire system and uncover the blind spots of privilege and poverty in our schools. We all nod to the fact that we have students who qualify for free and reduced meals in our schools, but have we really examined the impact of poverty on the lives of our students? Have we understood the perspective of our students and their families who live in poverty? When we return to our classrooms, how will we counteract the beliefs amongst our students in poverty that they are inferior to their wealthier peers? The stakes for society are high and we must face the historic and contemporary disparities in power, privilege and access which have been presented to us in very concrete ways in the last month.

Addressing the socio-economic disparity is only one of many factors we need to be considering as we plan for the re-opening of our classrooms. Educators, administrators, families and

community members need to gather together to begin thinking about how we will most effectively meet the needs of our students in the next few months. How will we administer high-quality, formative assessments to determine what types of compensatory education is needed? How do we make sure that every school is a trauma-sensitive school and has the necessary counseling services in place? We can't allow ourselves to be so overwhelmed by immediate demands that we ignore the required planning for what's next.

We have much work to do. Thank you.