

To: Testimony to the Vermont Senate Education Committee

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Re: Remote Learning and Continuity of Learning Plans during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A Challenge for Communities Awaiting a Vaccine

Thank you, Chairman Baruth and members of the committee.

We'd like to start by sharing some comments and then look forward to answering any questions. We're taking a somewhat longer view than the rest-of-year Continuity Plans but the ideas certainly have implications for what can happen in the next several months.

Education, rather than war, is the better metaphor for life during a pandemic. Our bodies are not so much at battle with the virus as they are struggling to learn about it, recognize it, and develop an appropriate response to it. Ultimately, a vaccine and mass immunization will safely teach our immune systems to manage the virus. But until then, our families, communities and societies are living—and learning—through this pandemic. And our youth are learning through it as well.

Our children will never forget this time. A time when, for months, they couldn't gather to play with their friends. When they forgot what it felt like to visit their grandparents or cousins. When their baseball, softball, and soccer seasons, their dances and proms, their worship services and holiday gatherings, their summer road trips and day camps were all canceled. When a third or more of working adults in their families and communities lost their jobs, and those who had jobs either were lucky enough to stay at home or risked their lives as "essential workers." When daily joys interrupted scenes of sorrow, hunger and grief. When their laughter rose above the grim drone of infection statistics and mounting death tolls.

Our communities and our schools have never been through anything like this. And it's not ending anytime soon. This pandemic will inform who our children become, what they believe about family, society, democracy, and the role of schools. They will learn all this not just by watching adults but also through the roles they play in addressing the challenges they and their communities will face. What if we don't give them a role? What if they learn only to be bystanders to the turmoil in their communities?

We have a choice in designing a response to the pandemic that allows our educational system to continue with the status quo or move in a direction that prioritizes community and the common good. For the former, it would look like "doing school" remotely - focused on grades, completing assignments, and academic achievement narrowly construed from standardized tests. For the latter, education would instead focus on students' worries and needs, their loved ones and relationships, and the questions and concerns they have about their community, their futures and the world, in an equitable and sustainable way.

Building on Vermont's Personalized Learning Initiatives

Fortunately, our state educational system already prioritizes learning in and with the community. For decades Vermont has developed policies that have focused on some of these key issues even before Vermont education was faced with COVID-19 pandemic. In 1968 the [Vermont Design for Education](#)

offered 17 statements to guide school district implementation of student-centered learning. In 2002 [High Schools on the Move](#) recommended that:

schools begin by adapting existing programs and aiming their action plans toward the Twelve Principles ... and that high schools include entire communities in changing the secondary school experience. By engaging families, teachers, human service agencies, businesses, colleges, elementary and middle schools in helping individual students pursue their personal aspirations and meet high standards, a high school can help develop opportunities for learning throughout the community (p. vi).

And in 2013 [Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Initiative](#), set in motion the three pillars of personalized learning - personalized learning plans, flexible pathways in and out of school, and proficiency based assessment.

This vision of community-focused learning aligns with significant and common challenges Vermont's communities now face. Most immediately, for instance, are the significant strains on our health systems, food systems, broadband and transportation infrastructures, and most fundamentally to school systems, the basic well-being of our children. The strains in these systems are exhibited both in terms of how services are provided but also in the many jobs they create, many of which are now at risk.

Addressing the systems challenges of our communities has long been the focus of educators at the forefront of personalized learning, even before Act 77. When teachers take on community challenges, they see students deeply engaged in focused, coherent, and collaborative learning. They see students and community partners embrace the converging interests and passions of youth and adults, schools, and communities. Students witness the power of tapping assets and expertise across even the most distressed communities. Students realize the authentic, real-world application of critical knowledge and transferable skills from across the disciplines. And they see parents, community members, school boards, and others awed by what young people care about and are able to accomplish in the world. Here are several recent examples among many others over the years and across the state.

Examples of Community-Based Learning in Practice

The Green Team at Main Street Middle School believes that students of the 21st century must know and understand how issues related to climate change and sustainability will impact their economic, social, political, and geographical futures. They form teams to investigate sustainability issues and collaborate with community-based organizations. In the Main Street Middle School Trash Audit, for example, students worked with Chittenden Solid Waste District to understand what and how much trash the school was creating and then developed a recycle plan to reduce the trash coming from the school.

Middle school students at Orleans Elementary School work with Shelburne Farms' Cultivating Pathways to Sustainability Program to learn about the UN Global Goals for Sustainability. They use those goals to think about issues that they can address in Orleans and the surrounding area. They decided their community most needed to seek the goals of No Poverty and Zero Hunger. In response, students, in collaboration with community members, planned a community dinner and created a school store to sell bake-sale items. The money from both events was then donated to community organizations that fight poverty and hunger in the Northeast Kingdom.

The iLab at Winooski High School is a technology-rich space in which students have the opportunity to explore their own areas of interest, work with community experts, and take ownership of their learning. Students enroll in the iLab just like any other course in middle or high school, but the curriculum is student-directed and project-based for students interested in investigating authentic, real-world issues important to them. Projects include such topics as participating in a local Peace and Justice Center, performing a Buddhist ceremony for family and friends, and creating a wellness guide for new American women.

Vermont is also rich with community partners. The Community Engagement Lab, Vermont Folklife Center, Farm to School, Shelburne Farms, Vermont Energy Education Program, and many other organizations offer ready-to-use curricula that engage teachers and students in learning with and for communities. Other organizations, including Up for Learning, Big Picture, the Middle Grades Collaborative, and the Tarrant Institute, specialize in helping educators, youth and adults work effectively together to engage in meaningful learning in the community.

All of these examples and resources provide opportunities for engaging, focused and coherent learning. They prioritize the transferable skills, the most critical learning outcomes for our students' future success. They generate vivid and authentic evidence of growth that community members can readily appreciate and are fodder for personalized learning plans and proficiency-based assessment. Further, the people involved in this work are already making the transition to the remote context we are living with now and, at least intermittently, for months or years to come.

A Core Curriculum About Core Community Needs

We suggest that a core curriculum focused on core community needs is more important now than ever for many stakeholders. Teachers and families cannot sustain “doing school” remotely. The traditional school curriculum is untenable and inequitable under any circumstances. Pursued remotely, it will compound inequality to a degree we simply cannot accept.

Community members and organizations have much-needed expertise and capacity to engage with schools but often struggle to integrate into the overcrowded standard school curriculum. Yet they are the key to expanding students' connections with caring adults, with mentors to see them through this challenging time, and with partners who model for them what professional and civic participation looks like under the most challenging of circumstances.

State leadership needs education to reduce inequality, promote more prosperous life outcomes for its youth, and contribute to long-term economic and social stability. State and local leaders need ways to engage and coordinate all available resources to address the crises in public health, the economy, and community. And they need schools to more directly address community challenges if they expect taxpayers to pass budgets under such dire economic circumstances.

From Trauma to Transformation

At his news conference yesterday, Governor Scott wondered aloud what it would look like if we seized upon this moment to invent the schools we really need. For the last several weeks, schools and districts have wondered this as well, as they completed their Continuity of Learning Plans. Yet for most of us, this last month has been about trauma and triage. As the depth of the crisis sinks in, and its horizon extends farther into the future, we must begin to map the longer term. The cracks in our society in general, and in our education system in particular, are revealed more clearly than ever. The intense pressure on our systems and on our families, educators, neighbors and leaders is forcing us to decide what's most important. Focusing on what's best for our children can create critical opportunities to build more resilient, transformed communities and schools. We can begin that work now by nurturing community schools focused on a core curriculum about core community needs.

Thank you once again to the Chair and committee members. We welcome your questions.