

My name is Kathleen Moore. I am a member of the Vermont Faculty Federation AFT union. I teach at the Community College of Vermont, and I am also a TRIO program faculty coach for first-generation and low-income students.

You already know that Vermont is ranked last in per-capita higher education funding in the country. In the country! Last! That means that we are behind Mississippi! Behind Alabama! That is not a place we should be.

As a result, we have one of the highest tuitions of any community college in the country!

Keep in mind that Vermont has not always neglected higher education. But! State support has plummeted since 1980 when state appropriations covered 51% of the costs of the Vermont State College system. Currently, they pay for less than 20% of the costs.

What that means is that since 1980, the burden of higher education cost has been transferred to *tuition* – and that means it's been transferred onto the ***backs of students***, who now graduate with higher-than-average debt.

I want to tell you how extremely difficult it is for many of my students to succeed and why passing S.38 -- the free tuition bill -- would make a huge difference for them – as long as it is not restricted to students who can attend-full time.

Before they ever set foot in the college, many Community College students are already wrestling with a deck that is stacked against them. Most CCV students must work for a living – even as they are attempting to educate themselves to gain a foothold in the middle class. They wrestle with poverty, they may come from single-parent households, they may be single parents themselves, and they may be wrestling with mental illness or the challenges of recovery.

Now add in trying to make enough money to pay your rent, buy diapers, figure out how to get to the food shelf when your car just broke down, and then think about how you're going to work the night shift, and, oh yeah, get your homework done.

Think about the fact that if your computer breaks down – if you even have one – it's a major crisis.

Students from middle class homes can just go to Staples and get another one.

Students who are from poverty or near poverty are faced with a very real crisis. And for want of a horseshoe – or a computer – the battle – or the course -- or even the degree -- is sometimes lost.

We can do better. We must do better. It is unacceptable for our system to continue as is.

I challenge our legislators to think creatively about how to insure that higher education is a priority in our state. Free tuition for all students at public colleges and universities is the right choice.

Two final notes: DO NOT restrict this offer to students who are able to attend college full-time. Such a provision would cast aside the very students who MOST need access to tuition support. And please do not ask those who cannot finish in a timely way to pay the support back. That places an unfair burden on those who cannot – for a variety of reasons ranging from health to family to children to employment – finish in a timely way.

Thank you.