

Andrew G LaBarge

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H. 106 Testimony

Molly Stark as a Community School

Good afternoon and thank you for letting me speak as a witness to house bill H106. My name is [Andrew LaBarge](#) and I have been teaching third grade at Molly Stark Elementary in Bennington, Vermont since 2014. I am a lifelong resident of New York with roots in Arlington, Vermont. My work in my school does not end when the school day is over. I am building leader and treasurer for my local association and I was the summer school coordinator for Molly Stark before Covid struck. I have also been on the negotiations team for my local for the last three years. Enough about me, because the reason we are speaking today is in support of creating community schools in Vermont. I would like to talk about how Molly Stark has been a model of how we can create a community school.

The Molly Stark School has been the center of our community for a very long time. The name comes from the famous patriot, and wife of General John Stark, Molly Stark. She was a great caregiver to the colonists as they fought the British in the Revolutionary War. Molly was known for feeding and caring for so many of the troops that her name became synonymous with community service. The Molly Stark Elementary school has evolved somewhat from its early model as a "Community School," but many of the services are still available to students and families in the community. For many years the Molly Stark Family Outreach was headed up by our assistant Principal. There was never a day you would get to school before or leave after her. The time she spent coordinating everything that families needed was amazing. She knew everything about every family that came to our school. For a while with her leadership, we were

truly a Community School. Today, Molly Stark Elementary is part of a large school district that has six elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and a newly named Tech Center. Molly Stark is located in uptown Bennington. It is surrounded by multiple community housing developments that provide low income housing to many Benningtonians. Many residents of the nearby community have limited resources and transportation. The location of the school has been an important part of its role as a community school. Molly Stark provides free breakfast and lunch to all learners. Another service to the local community before Covid, was when the school parking lot would host the local food pantry truck, Veggie VanGo, on the first and third Wednesday of every month.

Molly Stark provides an education for learners in kindergarten through fifth grade. On site, there is also a pre-K program for three and four year olds in the early childhood education program. This program provides a head start for many learners and even though it is only a few hours a day, it gives children the opportunity to interact with other children in social and emotional relationships. This program also helps trained educators identify early learning needs of children and provides a head start in identifying special education needs. The early childhood learning staff also provides the opportunity for school aged children to attend a before and after school care program with a fun, creative, and safe learning environment. Learners can attend before school as early as 7 AM and after school until 5:30 PM. In addition to the early learning center programs, Molly Stark has been providing after school programs for years. After school runs 3-4:30 four days a week during the school year. The programs usually run for six week sessions with three sessions per year. Of course with the Covid-19 pandemic, many of these services have been suspended. In addition to the afterschool program the district maintains a minimal \$20,000 budget to administer a summer school program for all learners. In 2019, we had about 80 of our 380 learners attend our

four week summer learning program. The program ran four days a week, four hours a day, with breakfast and lunch provided. Other community engagement activities at Molly Stark, and other schools in the district, include math and literacy nights, open house, and more. These programs facilitate family learning activities and many families attend. From my experiences with these nights, when food can be provided attendance seems to increase.

The New England Center for Children (NECC) is also housed within the Molly Stark building and provides educational, emotional, and physical support for children in the autism spectrum. The program integrates learners into regular education classroom settings whenever possible and provides individual education plans for each learner. This program has been a great success in the community and provides families with the tools they need to help their children right in the community and school near them.

Molly Stark holds attendance challenges and provides awards to families who are able to get their children to school every day. We provide tutoring programs throughout the school year and some programs can be continued during the summer months to insure some reading, writing, and math skill practice. Molly Stark has created and continues to provide the Molly Stark Scholarship Fund which is awarded to Molly Stark Graduates who go on to attend college.

Another important part of the community school model is health services. Providing these services in the school building instead of in a health care setting is beneficial to the families in many ways. At Molly Stark, we have an on-site Audiologist and one of the most advanced hearing centers in the region. Not only is the hearing center available to our learning community, but it is also available to the public by appointment for many of the elderly. The health office at Molly stark has two full time nurses on staff and can assess learners vision and general health. The health office also provides daily medical services such as medication delivery, glucose monitoring, and

insulin injections in elementary aged learners. Molly Stark was one of a few places that provided dental care within the school building. Dr Brady, who retired a few years ago, held some of his dental practice at Molly Stark. He would deliver dental services to children from families that needed dental care but were unable to provide it for their children. A part time hygienist still works with many of the learners, but since Dr. Brady's retirement, the services inside the building have been interrupted. Mental health is also a necessary service that must be available to students and families of the community. Especially today in this covid world, mental health needs must be addressed. Molly Stark employs two full time councilors, and uses area mental health staff from DCF to provide counselling to learners of trauma and poverty.

Molly Stark works in conjunction with The Sunrise Family Resource Center which provides counseling, parenting support, home visits, and much more. All of these components are crucial in creating a community school that works to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in the local community. Factors that are difficult are often too much for families and they are unable to provide the necessary care for their children. Having more schools in Vermont that use the community school model to improve the overall health and mental wellbeing of the community is important. I am excited that your committee is considering H.106 and I hope you will move this concept forward. I believe that the pilot model envisioned could be very helpful to building existing and new supports for our students and communities. This pandemic has only exasperated the need for schools to create partnerships with their communities. Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.

<http://mollystark.apps.svsu.org/home/services>

