

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: February 19, 2021

SUBJECT: Testimony on H.106

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about H.106. On behalf of the 13,000 teachers and school support staff members of Vermont-NEA we believe that H.106 will begin to address some of the most critical issues that affect students' ability to learn, families' ability to succeed and educators' ability to teach. I think the testimony that you just heard from Liz Parris and Andrew LaBarge speaks to the impact and promise of this bill.

We all know the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on students and families and how it is has exposed and exacerbated many of the complex societal challenges. However, for many years prior to the pandemic, we heard from educators across the state that they have a greater and greater number of students - especially in the earliest grades - coming to school unprepared to learn due to complex issues related to poverty, homelessness, mental health, the opioid crisis, and other challenges. What we hear from our members reflects the research that demonstrates that if a child is concerned with where they will be sleeping that night, whether their family or caregivers are safe, or if they will have food over the weekend they will struggle to access learning in schools. In April of 2019 we surveyed our members about various issues impacting education in Vermont. When asked about the current problems they are most concerned about in Vermont schools, 93 percent of educators identified the impact poverty and hunger are having on student learning. In the summer of 2017, the Generally Assembly convened the Adverse Childhood Experience Working Group of which Chair Webb was a member. The working group heard from teachers, social workers, mental health professionals, doctors, and Vermonters about the impacts of trauma on our citizens and communities. Asked at a press conference about the release of the working group report, your colleague Rep. Donahue from Northfield said, "What surprised me the most was hearing testimony from our school systems, from teachers, about the really, really dramatic changes they're seeing in the kids that are coming into the primary grades connected with the opiate crisis". Over the past several years, this committee has heard about these challenges from Superintendents, school social workers, classroom teachers, school counselors and many others. These heart wrenching stories are hard to hear but happen every single day in every school, in every community across our state.

The reality is that our public schools may be the only safe place a child has during a day, week or year. Our public schools take every child and work incredibly hard to support them to be happy, healthy learners. As you heard from Liz and Andrew our schools currently provide so much more than what schools did 15, let alone 50 years ago and are just some examples of what our public schools are trying to do to help all students access learning.

But the reality is that teachers and educators – try as hard as they might because of their deep commitment to the students they serve – can't also be social workers, mental health clinicians, housing advocates or any other professional with specialized training to meet the acute and systemic challenges facing our most vulnerable students and their families.

We believe that H.106, especially as we work to emerge from the pandemic, can create a path forward in Vermont to allow schools to deepen impactful and collaborative relationships with State and local agencies to have a positive impact on both students and families dealing with trauma that impacts their ability to learn and thrive.

I believe next week the committee will hear from the Learning Policy Institute to provide some national context but H.106 would build upon work that is happening across the nation to address the same challenges Vermont schools and students are facing. There are approximately 5,000 “community schools” across the United States that work to address the needs of the whole child which includes supporting the family. It is important to highlight that one advantage we have in Vermont is that our schools are already deeply integrated into the fabric of our towns and neighborhoods.

H.106 launches a pilot program that would allow up to 10 school districts across the state to deepen a comprehensive approach for their communities, their students, and their families. There are a few points that I want to make as a follow up to testimony from the AOE earlier this week on H.106 and their support for the vision and work outlined in the bill.

- The time is now – We understand that there is a significant amount of work happening to support students and families and build towards recovery. We believe this is exact reason that now is the time to move forward H.106 to allow communities to “turbo charge” this work, to use Rep. Brady’s term from earlier this week.
- Challenge by choice – It is important to remember that this is not a requirement, but a pilot program that districts can choose to apply for. This will create opportunities for school districts that are ready to step into this work or build upon their existing work to do that in alignment with their recovery.
- Grant amount – We understand the recommendation for flexibility in the grant amounts and can see value in that. If the Committee is interested in moving in this direction, we would want to make sure that there was a minimum number of pilot sites to ensure that the pilot funding is distributed equitably. The other recommendations from the AOE regarding the grants seem reasonable.
- Community School Coordinator – I am sure we can all think of great ideas or projects that never fully realize their potential because no single person owns the work. One core principle of the community schools model is having a coordinator to ensure the success of the work, build the relationships, etc. If we are talking about building community buy-in and participation while developing lasting organizational and cross-sector relationships to support students and families, that can't just be an add-on to an already overtaxed building administrator, school nurse or social worker. The fidelity of the model depends upon having a designated community schools coordinator.

Our students are struggling to access the learning they deserve because of issues beyond the walls of the classroom, and the pandemic has only put an even finer point on that, but our public schools have a responsibility to those students and their families to help them succeed. We believe the pilot envisioned in H.106 will allow us to break down silos, build out creative collaboration, and support to the fullest extent possible the whole child so they can learn and thrive not just today but for a lifetime.