

TO: House Committee on Ways & Means
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Executive Director
DATE: January 27, 2021
RE: Education Fund

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today about the education fund. My name is Jeff Fannon, and I am the executive director of Vermont-NEA, which is affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA). Vermont-NEA represents approximately 13,000 teachers and educational support staff professionals or “ESP” who work primarily in Vermont’s public pre-k to 12 schools.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that we are all still living and working during a global health pandemic. That has meant great sacrifices and in some cases loss for all of us. Everyday I have the great pleasure of working with our dedicated public-school employees – teachers, paraeducators, bus drivers, guidance counselors, school nurses, bus drivers, food service workers, among others – over 75% of whom are women. Since before the pandemic, but even more so now, school employees have stepped up every day to support our students, families, and communities. They worked to create spaces where their students can feel safe and cared for, sometimes at great costs to their own families. Vermont schools are a model for the nation and that is in large part because Vermont educators – frontline essential workers – working in collaboration with school leaders have made it happen. Indeed, most schools are open and operating educating Vermont’s children, and while some schools are fully in-person and others in a hybrid arrangement, most educators are in school almost every day.

I say this because I would be remis if I did not acknowledge the great work of our public school employees during these difficult times, but I also wanted to remind us all that as we discuss school finance there are real people behind the numbers including dedicated school employees and students who just want to get back to normal. Sadly, however, school is not back to normal and the needs of students and schools is greater than I have ever seen in my almost 20 years of advocating on behalf of Vermont’s school systems, including educators and students.

The pandemic has exposed all of society’s shortcomings and in some cases exacerbated them. Low income students lack broadband, but connectivity isn’t merely getting a wire to a house, it is also having an adult there to help with homework and food to eat. Schools have dealt with these issues and more since March of last year, and it continues. Consequently, student’s learning has been delayed but it isn’t lost. Kids are learning new skills, time management for example, but their needs have increased. Students’ social emotional well-being must be a priority and our budgets must reflect that priority. The federal monies have been a tremendous help and should be used to make sure students have the resources they need to re-start their education. Educating students means resources and that means educators to teach them, feed them, transport them, counsel them, etc. Literacy means small groups of students working with a teacher to make sure everyone is learning and kids aren’t falling between the cracks.

When I speak with my peers around the country, I am proud of the work Vermont does in educating every student and that we don't merely pass kids along without tending to their entire needs, which includes having counselors, special education teachers and para-educators, school nurses and not just teachers and bus drivers. The whole child matters in Vermont and that does take resources, and resources means educators—plain and simple.

The education fund provides the necessary resources schools need to educate Vermont's children. Thankfully, that fund is full right now and those resources are needed now and will be needed over the next several years. I've heard educators say the needs of students will continue over the next several years to completely address the disruption in learning that is ongoing. The pandemic is not over, and indeed, it is likely students under 16 won't even be eligible for vaccinations until next school year at the earliest.

I want to acknowledge and applaud this committee's work last year supporting schools and taking a wait and see approach to the FY21 Education Fund. Your patience and acknowledgement that students and schools had a critical role to play as we move through this pandemic and the critical needs of our students and educators was greatly appreciated.

As you know, at this point, most school boards have set their budgets for next year and those will be voted on at this year's version of Town Meeting. Many of those budgets were built upon the assumption laid out in the December 1st letter, and we know that is no longer accurate. We all know that as we move into the next phase of supporting students over the next several years as we recover from the pandemic, our schools will need the resources to do so. The federal government is providing significant support to our Pre-k-12 public schools and we want to make sure that going forward school districts and boards have the information to build budgets that ensure the needs of students are able to be met.

Finally, there are several education fund matters that are worthy of mention. The weighting study and Act 173's as yet not implemented block-grant funding, need a full airing. Both issues are significant and will have an impact on schools, education, and taxes. And finally, really, the tax structure commission's report discussed abolishing the residential property tax in favor of the income tax, and Vermont-NEA supports that proposal and has for several years. Income taxes, like property taxes, are variable at the margins but income taxes are stable enough to fund state government and it is the best way to establish one's ability to pay a tax. Collectively, these issues create an opportunity to discuss a better way to finance the needs of students and communities.