

H.106

An act relating to equitable access to a high-quality education through community schools

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. SHORT TITLE

This act shall be called the “Community Schools Act.”

Sec. 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE

(a) Findings. The General Assembly finds that:

(1) Every child should be able to grow up and have the opportunity to achieve their dreams and contribute to the well-being of society. Every child deserves a public school that fully delivers on that promise.

(2) According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than half of the nation’s schoolchildren live in low-income households, meaning they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a percentage that has risen steadily in recent decades. According to the Vermont Agency of Education, an average of 38 percent of students across all supervisory unions during the 2019–2020 school year qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. As a result, some schoolchildren face more challenges than others in succeeding in school and in life.

(3) Community schools facilitate the coordination of comprehensive programs and services that are carefully selected to meet the unique needs of

students and families, such as substance misuse, lack of stable housing, inadequate medical and dental care, hunger, trauma, and exposure to violence, so students can do their best.

(4) According to research reports from the Learning Policy Institute, the four key pillars of the community schools approach, which are integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices, promote conditions and practices found in high-quality schools as well as address out-of-school barriers to learning.

(5) This research also shows that community school interventions can result in improvements in a variety of student outcomes, including attendance, academic achievement (including reducing racial and economic achievement gaps), and high school graduation rates, and can meet the Every Student Succeeds Act standard of “evidence-based” approaches to support schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support and intervention.

(6) Research also shows that these programs offer a strong return on investment. According to impact studies, each dollar invested in a community coordinator position returns approximately \$7.00 in net benefits to the school (Return on Investment of a Community School Coordinator: A Case Study; APEX and Community School Partnership; 2019). Every dollar invested in programs and support (including medical, dental, and social services;

afterschool and summer enrichment; parent engagement; and early childhood services) can yield up to \$15.00 in return (Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence; Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam; 2017).

(7) According to the Learning Policy Institute, “establishing community schools” is one of 10 recommended strategies for restarting and rethinking the role of public education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Community schools serve as resource hubs that provide a broad range of easily accessed, well-coordinated supports and services that help students and families with increasingly complex needs.

(8) Community schools have been established in many states and settings, from New York City to Chicago and Los Angeles. But the approach has also been successful in rural communities. In McDowell County, West Virginia (population 22,000), community schools are part of a public-private partnership, a collaboration between state government, nonprofit agencies, businesses, and philanthropic foundations, that aims to “make educational improvement the route to a brighter economic future.” The national nonprofit Rural School and Community Trust is an active advocate for expanding this model in rural areas, calling the relationship between good schools and thriving communities “crucial.” In Vermont, a growing number of schools are implementing or exploring the model, from Molly Stark Elementary in

Bennington, which offers school-based health services, extended hours, summer school, and family learning activities, to the school-based health center in Winooski.

(b) Purpose. This law is enacted to support a demonstration grant program for the implementation of community school programs that provide students with equitable access to a high-quality education.

Sec. 3. COMMUNITY SCHOOLS; DEMONSTRATION GRANT
PROGRAM

(a) Definitions. As used in this section:

(1) “Community school coordinator” means a person who:

(A) is a full-time or part-time staff member serving in an eligible school or in a school district or supervisory union with an eligible school and appointed in accordance with Vermont law; and

(B) is responsible for the identification, implementation, and coordination of a community school program, subject to the operational and reporting structure of the community school coordinator’s employer.

(2) “Community school program” means a program offered at a public elementary or secondary school that includes all four of the following:

(A) integrated student supports, which address out-of-school barriers to learning through partnerships with social and health service agencies and providers, coordinated by a community school coordinator, which may include

access to services such as medical, dental, vision care, and mental health services, or access to counselors to assist with housing, transportation, nutrition, immigration, or criminal justice issues;

(B) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, which may include before-school, afterschool, weekend, and summer programs, that provide additional academic instruction, individualized academic support, enrichment activities, and learning opportunities that emphasize real-world learning and community problem-solving and that may include art, music, drama, creative writing, hands-on experience with engineering or science, tutoring and homework help, and recreational programs that enhance and are consistent with the school's curriculum;

(C) active family and community engagement, which brings students' families and the community into the school as partners in children's education and makes the school a community hub, providing adults with a facility to access educational opportunities they want, which may include coordinating services with outside providers to offer English as a second language classes, green card or citizenship preparation, computer skills, art, financial literacy, career counseling, job skills training, services for substance misuse, and other programs that bring community members into the building for meetings or events; and

(D) collaborative leadership and practices, which build a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility using strategies that shall, at a minimum, leverage the multitiered system of supports and include a community school coordinator and a representative of families in the community, and may include school, school district, and other leadership or governance teams; teacher learning communities; and other staff to manage the multiple, complex, joint work of school and community organizations.

(3) “Demonstration grant” means a grant provided to an eligible applicant under this section.

(4) “Eligible applicant” means either a school district with an eligible school or supervisory union with an eligible school.

(5) “Eligible school” means a public elementary or secondary school that:

(A) has a student body where at least 40 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, 42 U.S.C. § 1751 et seq.; or

(B) has been identified for comprehensive or equity support and intervention under Section 1111(c)(4)(D) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 or otherwise identified by the State as in need of additional support.

(b) Demonstration grant authorization. The Secretary of Education is authorized to provide annual demonstration grants of up to \$110,000.00 a year for a period of three years for each eligible applicant to:

(1) hire a community school coordinator to develop and implement a community school program; or

(2) designate a community school coordinator from existing personnel and augment work already being performed to develop and implement a community school program.

(c) Grant administration.

(1) The Secretary of Education shall administer the demonstration grant program under this section. The Secretary shall develop the demonstration grant application, determine grant amounts, and provide grant funding on or before September 1 of each of 2021, 2022, and 2023 to successful applicants. The Secretary may deny or reduce second- and third-year grant funding if the Secretary finds that the applicant has made insufficient progress towards developing and implementing a community school program.

(2) The Agency of Education shall inform supervisory unions of the availability of demonstration grants under this act and provide technical assistance to eligible applicants in applying for these funds. The Agency of Education shall also advise eligible applicants of other sources of funding that may be available to advance the purpose of this act.

(d) Use of grant funding.

(1) An eligible applicant shall use the demonstration grant funding to hire a community school coordinator to develop and implement a community school program or to designate a community school coordinator from existing personnel and augment work already being performed to develop and implement a community school program.

(2) If the funding is used to hire a community school coordinator, then during the first year of demonstration grant funding, the community school coordinator shall conduct a needs and assets assessment of the school to determine what is necessary to develop a community school program and an action plan to implement the community school program. During the second and third years of demonstration grant funding, the community school coordinator shall oversee the implementation of the community school program.

(e) Evaluation.

(1) At the end of each year of grant funding, each eligible applicant that received grant funding shall undergo an evaluation designed by the Agency of Education.

(2) On or before each of December 15, 2022 and 2024, the Agency of Education shall report to the General Assembly and the Governor on the

impact of the demonstration grant program. The report shall be made publicly available on the Agency of Education's website.

Sec. 4. APPROPRIATION OF FUNDS

(a) The Secretary of Education shall use \$3,399,000.00 of the amount allocated to the Agency of Education from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 pursuant to Section 2001(f)(1), 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2 for the demonstration grants to be funded on or before September 1 of each of 2021, 2022, and 2023 under Sec. 3 of this act.

(b) The Agency of Education may set aside:

(1) not more than one percent of the funds appropriated under subsection (a) of this section for each of fiscal years 2022, 2023, and 2024 for informational and technical assistance, such as assistance with applying for grant funding and use of grant funding, for eligible applicants as defined under Sec. 3 of this act; and

(2) not more than two percent of the funds appropriated under subsection (a) of this section for each of fiscal years 2022, 2023, and 2024 for the evaluations required under Sec. 3 of this act.

Sec. 5. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on passage.