



VERMONT LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE  
*Transforming education for a more just, joyful and sustainable world*  
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**To: House Committee on Education**  
**From: Ben Freeman, Network Coordinator, Vermont Learning for the Future**  
**Date: February 26, 2021**  
**Subject: Testimony on H.106**

The conditions for growing seeds of transformative change are rich in Vermont. The intersectional social, environmental and economic crises we face today are stark, both personal and communal, and pinned to our basic needs and identities. As educators and education reform advocates, we see these crises as responsibilities and opportunities.

Given freedom and resources to thrive, schools and their connected learning communities are our society's natural incubators of innovation and creativity. At their best, they are dedicated to continuous learning, personal growth and the realization of a more just, joyful and sustainable society. Centering schools at the nexus of social, environmental and economic resilience is not only practical, it is essential to cultivate a just transition that evolves and endures to meet the needs of all.

Across Vermont, an increasingly diverse network of individuals and partner organizations share a vision of education that “centers youth in equitable, reciprocal learning relationships that develop individual capabilities as they emerge as resilient global citizens.” Collectively, we are increasingly energized by an emergent vision of community schools as levers for positive change - for students and for communities. Historic focal points for school transformation such as place-based education, restorative practices, equity by design, youth-adult partnership and the Flexible Pathways triad of personalized, proficiency-based and outside-of-school learning all nest neatly within this framework. Community schools provide a coherence to network strategy and open opportunities for collaborative, cross-sector change.

This is not new work, there are schools across Vermont that highlight many of the essential elements of community schools. Existing policy, such as Act 77, “Flexible Pathways,” open the door for students to become fully engaged in the life of their communities through credit bearing internships, work, apprenticeships, service, and other ‘extended learning opportunities.’ Personalized Learning Plans enhance student engagement (and thus achievement) because learning is connected to their interests and curiosities, and they experience choice, autonomy, and decision-making about what they learn and how they go about it. When integrated in a community school context, these learning relationships highlight community strengths and surface opportunities for greater vibrancy through active learning and collaboration with youth. The great opportunity is this: at the same time as Community Schools address the symptoms of poverty, racism and other systemic and structural inequities in school, the ongoing community

dialog, learning and collaborative projects address the root causes of the inequities, building community cohesion, resilience and cause for joy.

While the scope of this legislation is not as encompassing as this full vision of Community Schools, we believe it creates an important pathway towards these goals and enthusiastically give it our support. In our written testimony, we have suggested language along several important themes, including:

- Building on the promising equity practices of Act 77 and Act 1, including an ethos of culturally and linguistically responsive, restorative approaches;
- Framing language and strategies through a strengths-based perspective;
- Making room for flexibility of implementation at the district level with understanding of the complexity of strengths and differences within each community; and
- The importance of fully engaging the community, including youth, at all stages of the process.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Ben Freeman is the Network Coordinator for Vermont Learning for the Future, a collective impact network striving to accelerate change in education towards equity, sustainability and joy. Ben lives in southern Vermont, is a former educator and administrator of over 20 years, a parent of three school-age children, and a member of the Taconic and Green School Board.*

*This testimony is part of a collaborative sharing offered by:*

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