

AOE Testimony: Testimony on H.106 – Community Schools

Testimony To: House Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D., Deputy Secretary of Education

Date: February 17, 2021

AOE agrees with the findings and purpose of this bill. It is critical that Vermont's education system work collaboratively with other entities to ensure students are healthy, both physically and mentally, and ready to learn. In addition, we support district efforts to work collaboratively with families, and all staff and educators, to bring about these goals. We also agree that an approach focused on our most vulnerable families and students is appropriate in this area.

Four Pillars

The bill is framed around four pillars detailed in a report by the Learning Policy Institute. This framework is interesting and compelling. Significant work under at least two of the pillars is already underway:

1. As part of education recovery plans (guidance coming out within the week), LEAs will be required to identify a local recovery team and point person for interfacing with a local state team assigned to them to assist with recovery. The state teams will ideally include both AOE and DMH, and possibly DCF, state resources/staff. Given this structure that will be in place, we advise taking up the Community School Coordinator piece next session, once LEAs have already begun to set up the underlying structures that will support Community Schools.
2. Expanded learning time, including after school, before school, summer activities, etc. is also an important component of robust education systems that we support. We urge the committee to review the report from the Task Force for Universal Afterschool Access first, before launching this component of the initiative. The group has been meeting for the past several weeks on this very topic—it makes sense to incorporate that work into this bill.
3. Collaborative decision-making is a core component of robust Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) systems. We suggest this strand of the bill interface more directly with MTSS work.

Finally, we agree that not enough state level or systemic focus on how to best engage parents and families currently exists in Vermont. We support efforts that strive to improve better communication and outreach to families, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Grants

In terms of the grants, we offer a few considerations:

1. We agree with the focus on historically marginalized students, but request that the bill not specify “identification for comprehensive school supports under ESSA” (or similar language). Using this as a required criterion could have long-term effects on how Title federal dollars can be spent. We support inclusion of language around poverty and other district-identified need for support.
2. At the AOE, we are working to bolster an SD/SU focus in all our initiatives to best ensure equity among schools both within SD/SUs and across the state. In addition, it is not schools but SD/SUs that apply for grants. We urge consideration of the target to be school districts or regional collaboratives, not individual schools, for this program.
3. Finally, we advise that instead of a predetermined sum of funding that would automatically go to each applicant, the bill is written so that districts or groups of districts apply based on their individual funding need. Need will vary across both region of the state and SDs/SUs, consistent with most other state grants the AOE implements.