

To: House Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols, Vermont Principals' Association
Sue Ceglowski, Vermont School Boards Association
Jeffrey Francis, Vermont Superintendents Association
Jo-Anne Unruh, Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators

Date: February 24, 2021

Re: H.106 - Community Schools

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.106 regarding the establishment of a grant program in support of Community Schools. Our Associations have worked together on a review of the bill, discussed the bill with Representative James earlier this week and are submitting this testimony as a collaborative action.

If it is acceptable to the Committee, each of us - Sue Ceglowski, Jeff Francis and Jay Nichols may speak to our collective observations and suggestions related to the bill. A representative from the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators is not with us this morning but VCSEA has reviewed and approved this written testimony.

To preface our comments, we want to indicate support for the underlying purpose of the bill, which is to establish a grant program to support the improvement of services to all children, but especially those children, and the families of those children, who are disadvantaged by socio-economic status, disability, race, immigrant status or some other circumstance that makes services and educational amenities less equitably available to them.

Our Associations also support the underlying premise of the bill, which is to support local initiatives to build upon the concept and implementation of "community schools" in order to better support whole child development through the organization and provision of enhanced school services. By improving services in support of children and families, the entire community will benefit.

This testimony is consistent with comments that we provided to Representative James in a meeting earlier this week. The comments run the gamut from very specific to quite general. Our frame of reference is Draft 5.1.

- 1) With respect to Section 2(A)(1) Findings - (1) Every child should be able to grow up and have the opportunity to achieve his or her dreams and contribute to the well-being of society. Every **neighborhood** deserves a public school that fully delivers on that promise.

We suggest replacing the word **neighborhood** with the word **child**. The subject of the first sentence is child and we want to suggest that the subject of the second sentence should be child as well. Vermont's public education system is not built on a foundation of neighborhood schools and to infer that it is through the language in the bill brings unnecessary confusion.

- 2) With respect to Section 2(A)(6) Findings we believe that this section would benefit from a reference to the specific studies that indicate the returns on dollars invested.
- 3) Regarding Section 2 Findings in general, we discussed with Representative James whether there is research that addresses community schools in urban, suburban and rural areas? We would speculate that the characteristics of community schools, the programs and the results accomplished under the community schools principles might differ based on the nature of the regions in which the schools are located and, if that is the case, that some reference in the bill might be useful.
- 4) In Section 3 Community Schools; Pilot Grant Program - we want to suggest referring to this Program as a Demonstration Grant Program rather than a Pilot Grant Program. Presumably, the recipients of the Community Schools Grants will be demonstrating the efficacy, experiences and success associated with their approach. Pilot has a connotation of trial and replicability - which may be relevant and useful overall and over time, but our understanding of this Program is that it will demonstrate approaches and initiatives established by participating school districts, which will differ from place to place. The demonstration of the implementation and success of these projects will be informative to all.
- 5) Also in Section 3 - Community Schools, we believe that the definition of "Community Schools Coordinator" would benefit from a specific reference to how persons are appointed to these positions under Vermont law. In our observation, it is not customary to see either specific education-related positions or the duties of a specific position prescribed in law. The exceptions are the positions of principal and superintendent, along with the duties of school boards. We understand the purpose of specifically referencing "community schools coordinator" in this legislation, but believe that it should be made clear that the position exists within the legal construct of a school district with duties relative to those assigned in law to principals, superintendents and school boards.

Under Vermont law, non-licensed personnel are appointed by the superintendent and licensed personnel are appointed by the school board upon recommendation of the superintendent. Neither requirement precludes the appointed community schools coordinator from performing the general duties envisioned by the bill. To make this clear we are suggesting the following changes to the relevant provisions as follows (note - the added language suggests concepts - drafting by legislative council may differ but should achieve the intended purpose):

(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 applicable provisions of Vermont law;** and

(B) **subject to authorities and supervision customary to the operation of Vermont schools,** is responsible for the identification, implementation, and coordination of a community school program.

- 6) Similarly, when our Associations reviewed this legislation we took note of the prescriptive nature delineating eligible uses of grant money and the requirement that the funds must be used to hire a Community Schools Coordinator. We know that certain schools already have personnel engaged in this or similar work. We recommend that eligible use of grant funds extend beyond the hiring of a Coordinator and allow for augmentation of work already underway. We also recommend consideration for flexibility in the uses of grant funding for demonstration purposes by approved districts. For example, a single town school district with a larger student population (by Vermont terms), which is also more suburban or urban may experience different dynamics and access to community and human resources in this context than a geographically-sprawling rural supervisory union might experience. Grant funding and expectations should allow for flexibility to accommodate those variable circumstances.
- 7) We also took note of the reference in Section 3 (b) authorizing the Secretary to prorate grants if appropriated funds are not sufficient to cover costs of the grants awarded. This language indicates that grants may not be fully funded. We find that runs counter to the notion of a pilot/demonstration grant program and may be problematic. In addition, we are compelled to acknowledge that as demonstration projects, the costs of these programs, regardless of how purposeful and irrespective of presumed returns on investment, will eventually show up in school district budgets. The costs will include personnel and program initiatives not covered by ongoing non-tax revenues (grants). We are anticipating that these programs will be very useful, but costs to school districts are cumulative and any new program added raises local school district costs when the outside funding ends.
- 8) In Section 3(c)(2) we believe the bill should more fully explain the technical assistance contemplated coming from the AoE. In our experience, when the technical assistant provided by the Agency does not align with what is expected from the field problems can result.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

