



NFI Vermont, Inc.

Providing Innovative Mental Health and Educational Services to Vermont's Children and Families

To: House Committee on Education

Date: April 7, 2021

Testimony: S. 16: Task Force on School Exclusionary Discipline Reform

From: Kym Asam, LICSW Regional Director of Schools and Clinical Programming for NFI Vermont

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide testimony on S.16 as passed by the Senate and sent to your Committee. I am Kym Asam, regional director of schools and clinical programming for NFI Vermont. In addition to overseeing 4 trauma-informed, day treatment schools, I also provide training and consultation for developing trauma-informed/responsive schools and am a Technical Assistant, coach and trainer for the Vermont BEST project. I am also involved in the SAMHSA Project Aware grant providing coaching to three SU/SD's on their installation of an Interconnected Systems Framework.

In all of our schools, we focus on the importance of relationships and fostering a sense of membership and belonging through the utilization of the normative approach which, among many tenets, promotes equity and reduces hierarchy. We provide a culture that promotes respect, integrity, active engagement and safety. The primary method of assisting students in recognizing the outcome of their behavioral challenges and choices that do not align with the school-wide expectations is a restorative approach. A community meeting format is used to provide opportunities for students to, with the assistance of their peers, reflect on their decisions/choices, understand the potential harm it has done and repair harm through relevant consequences. We focus on relationship repair, not rule violation. In addition, we utilize elements of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) in order to provide positive feedback and reinforcement as a proactive method to prevent behavioral challenges. We also utilize multiple modalities of instruction that include movement to support more regulated bodies and minds. Similar to instructional techniques, we differentiate our responses to students' stress behavior based on knowledge of the students' capacity to reflect and the safest place for the student to make repairs. If there is a significant concern that impacts potential safety, we may ask for a crisis screening from our local DA or enlist the support of the police. While it is rare, if an incident should occur that would require a student to be out of the community, we would expedite a restorative process to welcome the student back into their school community. We also understand that stress occurs in the physical and cultural environment so, therefore, all involved in supporting the student has responsibility to adapt and make changes to promote success and reduce triggers.

Almost all of the students we serve have intensive social/emotional/behavioral needs as a result of developmental trauma and yet, we rarely engage in exclusionary practices. When you remove a student from the context in which they experience stress behavior, you eliminate the opportunity for the student to practice more adaptive ways of managing stress in the very environment where it occurs. Any practice that has a student leave the classroom or learning environment reinforces marginalization and disenfranchisement – an unfortunate template that many students who are subjected to exclusionary practices have. It reinforces their belief that “I don't belong.”

In order for children to feel safe, adults need to feel safe. At NFI Vermont, we promote a culture of wellness through flexibility, respect, appreciation, feedback and validation of the important work that is done. This creates a culture and contagion of wellness. In addition, we utilize a method of supervision that does not focus on hierarchy, but focuses on reflection which allows our staff to be vulnerable because of established safety in our relationships. The consequence of this practice is the ability for folks to push the pause button, avoid being reactive and stay regulated when faced with dysregulated



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students. In other words, they cortically modulate because we know a dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated student. The culture that is created is one where feedback is welcome – either positive or constructive. We also develop a second theory about students by changing our mindsets. And when we change our mindset, we change practices. This is an important element of workforce development. In other words, the way we see students is how students see themselves so modeling resilience, restorying the challenges students experience to foster a healthier sense of self and tolerating the rupture and repair of relationships to build relational endurance are critical features to ensuring students stay connected to their school community and prevent exclusionary practices. All of these ways of work are trauma-informed and invite humanity into the daily challenges we all experience when working with students who are struggling.

I hope the task force will:

- Include the expertise of those who work in therapeutic, day treatment schools.
- Think about systems change including intentional wellness opportunities for staff throughout their days (wellness is not an individual's responsibility alone. Organizations also have responsibility for promoting wellness).
- Provide necessary resources and coaching to ensure durability of change including trauma-informed/responsive training, reflective practices and supervision and healthy forums in which to discharge adult distress.
- Consider how to integrate practices and resources to ensure there is alignment vs the all too common experience educators have of initiative fatigue.
- Reduce the tendency to engage in hierarchical dictates about what schools and staff must do and consider participatory decision-making. I.e., How do we want to be together vs this is how we are going to be together.