



Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning

Testimony
House Committee on Education

S. 16: Task Force on School Exclusionary Discipline Reform

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Introductions:

Good afternoon, my name is Evelyn Monje and I am a Winooski High School Student. I am a leader and mentor in Winooski Students for Antiracism, a youth consultant for the Vermont Equity Practitioners Network under the VPA, and a Youth Programs Specialist at UP for Learning. I have been in the education system my whole life and have begun to explore what education is on a systemic level through my work with these organizations. I am working with Restorative Practices within the Winooski and Burlington School Districts. As I have continued my work, I have been able to see how interconnected much of the inequalities of our education system are, and how we can begin to deconstruct and redesign our schooling with youth at the forefront.

Good afternoon, my name is Townes DeGroot and I am a senior at U-32 High School. I am a youth facilitator for UP for Learning, where I help train students of other schools in Restorative Practices. I am also a youth panel member of the Montpelier Community Justice Center where I work with young people who have come into conflict with the legal system in some capacity. I am also a student representative to my school district's school board. These experiences have shown me a lot of the failings of a punitive justice system in schools, and how important it is to create a supportive student environment. I also want to make clear that creating this environment is not something that can be done by individuals, but a supportive school environment has to be built into the systems of a school, including the policies, curriculum, and core aims of an educational institution.

Good afternoon, my name is Lindsey Halman and I am the Executive Director of the VT based non-profit organization, UP for Learning, which stands for Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning. Prior to joining UP for Learning, I taught middle school in Vermont for 15 years. During that time, I co-created the Edge Academy, a school-within-a-public school (Essex Middle School) dedicated to applying the principles of student centered and personalized learning. I have always believed that youth are the most valuable and transformative stakeholders in education. Therefore, there should always be opportunities for youth to be at the center of the decision-making that impacts their educational experience. During my time as a middle level educator, I spearheaded a school-wide shift to restorative practices. I am a nationally certified trainer of restorative practices, a volunteer with my local Community Justice Center and serve as a co-coordinator of the Vermont Restorative Approaches Collaborative. I am also a parent of a fourth grade student.

Over the course of the past 13 years, UP for Learning has worked with 95% of VT high schools, 50% of VT middle schools, and a growing number of elementary schools in Vermont, as they work toward systemic transformation, engaging all learners, and increasing the authentic voice of youth in learning and decision-making. UP contributes to the capacity of youth organizations across VT and beyond to challenge inequities and raise up youth voices as they lead us to a public education system that is accessible, equitable and radically inclusive of everyone. This means expansively modifying boundaries in a way which creates a difference in the possibilities for engagement, as well as creating spaces that are more accessible, welcoming and inclusive of all youth and adults. Over the past two years, our work with schools integrating youth-adult partnership and restorative practices has been one of our biggest growth areas. In 2019-2020, the Agency of Education provided one year of funding for the [Restorative Approaches Collaborative](#) (final report), led by UP for Learning, as the lead fiscal agent, and UVM's BEST Project, to support 7 schools and 3 school districts with the foundational learning and coaching needed to integrate Tier 1 restorative practices (community building) into their schools. Implementation science shows that in order for systemic change to occur it requires a deep commitment to change over 3-5 years (at a minimum). This requires training, coaching, time and support for educators, students and families. This involves resources to support schools in understanding the importance of Tier 1 (community and relationship building) practices as the foundation of this change, and how this paradigm shift will ultimately create safer schools where young people feel connected and a sense of belonging. We know that one year of funding is not enough to support systemic change. We hope that this will be one consideration for this committee as you think about the purpose of this Task Force.

We appreciate your willingness to hear from us today and were very pleased to see yesterday's version of the bill that reflects the testimony of many of our colleagues. We are particularly grateful to see the changing of the name to the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments. This is, after all, about the school climate. Behavior is a reflection of the climate and the environment. We have just a few more recommendations and considerations to add today, and will share these [through our slides](#).

We hope that the focus of the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments will center student voice, which is largely absent in our current state wide school discipline data systems. Vermont is uniquely positioned to lead critical, equity based school climate and discipline policy reform efforts. It must be recognized that it is easier to fall back on

gathering data and analyzing the findings, but at this point in time, it is clear that that is not what is necessary. When thinking about moving forward in terms of creating equitable and inclusive school climates, it is imperative to look at data that reflects students' experience. In Winooski School District we often return to our data to make sure that we are on track, but the real shift towards action has been we have allowed space for emotional testimonies and restorative practices to guide our work. In order to create real, systemic change it is essential that we begin to look at this work from a human perspective rather than the perspective of tradition or "what we have always done". For this transformation to truly reflect the communities these school systems represent, there must be practices in place to hear from the representative community. This is the change that is beginning in Winooski, and must begin across the state.

Over the past decade, there have also been many restorative justice practitioners working to support schools in the implementation of restorative practices to increase a sense of safety and belonging for Vermont students. There is clear data that these approaches are best practices for all schools. Therefore, it is imperative that voices of these practitioners are reflected in the makeup of the Task Force.

This will also require a paradigm shift in policies that transform, rather than reform and would eliminate suspensions and expulsions for Vermont students. It is essential that transformative policy takes shape to require all schools to move from a punitive disciplinary system to a restorative one. As we make this commitment to our youth to bring them a better education system, it is essential that the work is understood as interconnected. When approaching transformative policy, schools must move away from siloed education and create stronger connections to the work that is already beginning to take shape. Moving to transformative policy that ensures that educational equity is a right for all Vermont youth must be prioritized. We already have many promising policies in place Act 77: Flexible Pathways and Act 1: Ethnic and Social Equity Studies are just two. We hope that this Task Force will consider these transformative policies and how they too can create an equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students. Also, proposed policy, as proposed in S.63 an act relating to the prohibition of school resource officers is a clear example of the transformative policies that need to be put in place to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in the disciplinary data. Burlington School District made the decision to remove their SRO on April 6th, 2021 in response to the information provided by their own Safety Task Force that explored those same disparities. Burlington was able to recognize the root causes of many disciplinary data through a community engagement process, and create a clear and concise way for the school to proceed.

We hope that this Task Force will be an action-oriented group that listens to the voices of marginalized youth and adults to create new policies that provide an educational system where all students can attend and thrive.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share our testimony today and hope you will consider our recommendations moving forward. Thank you for taking the time for us to be here today.