

Don Tinney

Vermont-NEA

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Good afternoon, for the record, I am Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently serving as president of Vermont-NEA. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today and thank you for serving on this most important committee.

I am very happy that I will be joined by three colleagues from the field this afternoon—Chris Guros, Stephanie Miller and Larry O'Connor—and sincerely appreciate how your committee has consistently sought to hear the educator's voice during your deliberations. Throughout the legislative session, you will also be hearing from our Executive Director, Jeff Fannon, and our Political Director, Colin Robinson, who with great expertise represent our members while they are busy working at school.

As many of you know, Vermont-NEA represents over 12,000 educators in every corner of the state who are organized in local affiliates with their own governance structure. We are affiliated with the National Education Association, which is the largest labor union in the nation with over three million members.

I am beyond proud to represent our extraordinary Vermont educators who have never stopped working to meet the needs of their students since the onset of this pandemic. Our members put forth herculean efforts in adapting to remote learning last March, to continue providing instruction and engaging their students so they would feel as if they still belonged to the school community. Our food service workers, para-educators and school bus drivers went above and beyond the call of duty to provide nutritious meals to students and their families. If covid-19 has taught us anything, it is how important schools are in providing a nutrition lifeline to the children and youth of Vermont, which is why our organization will continue to promote the implementation of universal school meals in every community; educators know that hungry children cannot learn. Feeding all of our children is an integral part of educating our children and youth. This is just one true indicator of why the public school is the bedrock of every community. Seeing how important schools are in providing essential services to our students and their families during the pandemic affirms our vision for the development of the community school model.

As essential workers on the frontline, our educators have been going to work everyday, providing direct instruction and support to students in their classrooms and to students learning virtually at home. The hybrid models, which I am sure you have heard about, have allowed schools to maintain proper physical distancing and other safety protocols, but they have nearly doubled the workload of our teachers, since they must plan and implement lessons for both the physical classroom and the virtual classroom. While students may not be learning every lesson in our traditional curriculum, they continue to learn new lessons on a daily basis and have had to acquire executive skills that they would not have ordinarily learned until later in life.

Our support personnel, including custodial and maintenance staff, school bus drivers, para-educators, administrative assistants and food service workers continue to put themselves at risk on the frontlines in service to their students and their families.

When we consider the health risks and the chronic unpredictability that our members have been enduring since last March, we can easily understand why they have been experiencing levels of stress and anxiety as never before. Our educators have always been focused on the social-emotional wellbeing of their students; and in these tumultuous days, we have been reminding them to focus on their own social-emotional wellbeing. From being in meetings with folks from the Vermont Department of Mental Health, I know they share our concerns for the mental health of both our students and our education workforce. We must continue to work at banishing the stigma associated with mental health issues and do whatever we can to make sure the resources are available to provide counseling and other services to our students and our educators.

In the Spring of 2019, through a grant from the National Education Association, Vermont-NEA convened a summit of nearly 200 education stakeholders to discuss trauma-sensitive practices and our approach to creating safe, compassionate schools. Our work has continued in this area and over this last summer we hosted a webinar series with David Melnick of the Northeastern Family Institute who discussed Adverse Childhood Experiences, resiliency and how we can shift our mindset about student behavior. We received additional funding from our national organization to work with our New England counterparts in a regional approach to this work, incorporating a train-the-trainer model and other ideas in how we can make this work sustainable over time and across all school districts. This is not work that can be accomplished by sending individual educators off to a workshop or holding one in-service training. In the virtual setting and in the classroom, we must continue to address the trauma our students and educators have experienced and pay particular attention to the minority trauma our BIPOC and marginalized students have experienced. We must continue to do everything we can to make sure every school is a sanctuary for every student.

All the additional protocols and programmatic adjustments demanded by the pandemic have dramatically changed the school day; and our educators, as do all Vermonters, long for the day when we can return to what we used to call a “normal routine”. We share the goal of our state leaders to return to full-time, in-person learning, but only when it is safe for students and for the education workforce. While learning has continued throughout the pandemic, remote learning is not an effective substitute for in-person learning, where students experience daily human interactions with their educators and peers. Since returning to full-time, in-person instruction is a top priority, then protecting the health of the education workforce through vaccinations must also be a top priority.

Since last March, our members have not only been busy planning their own lessons and rewriting their curriculum but have also been involved with local committees in implementing the state’s health and safety guidelines and other protocols related to the pandemic. Over 20 of our members joined our Vermont-NEA statewide task force on the safe re-opening of schools to address issues related to our return to the classroom. For example, we have addressed not just the health and safety concerns of riding a school bus, but also the important equity issues related to

school transportation. Before the start of school, the task force hosted virtual town halls with Dr. Mark Levine, Dr. Breena Holmes, Dr. William Raszka and Dr. Benjamin Lee to disseminate up-to-date medical information to our members. They have also met with Secretary French to share their concerns and to hear his perspective on re-opening. They continue to meet to address health and safety concerns and most recently hosted a webinar with industrial hygienists affiliated with the National Education Association to explore the issues related to ventilation in our school buildings. Air quality will continue to be an issue we need to address during the pandemic and beyond; we appreciate the General Assembly's support of HVAC inspections and upgrades in the last session.

As educators, we never thought we'd be learning so much about HVAC systems, epidemiology, physical distancing, and the difference between viral droplets and aerosols, but the learning curve has been steep and interesting. Vermont-NEA continues to be the premier source of professional development for educators in Vermont and our professional programs director and her committee adapted quickly to the virtual world and the need for new approaches to teaching remotely.

Learning is at the core of what we do. Our educators cherish the time they spend with their students and are the adults in their young lives, outside of their immediate family, who know them best. They know how their students learn and, through ongoing informal assessment, know what interventions and supports they need. Our educators will need additional resources to support their students as they address the unfinished learning from this pandemic. They will need dedicated planning time within their local districts to develop long-term strategies to assist our students and their families recover from this pandemic. Vermont educators are up for that challenge, driven and sustained by their love and commitment for their students. Thank you.