

**Vermont Senate Education Subcommittee  
Testimony of: Rebecca Tatistcheff, Ed. D, Principal, Cabot School  
Act 67 - Community Schools**

Thank you for inviting me to share some of our work at Cabot School in the context of being a community school. Before I talk about the work that we have engaged in this year as a Community School, I want to emphasize that this work began well before I became the principal at Cabot School and well before the advent of the legislation and funding. Cabot School embodies what it means to be a community school. As many of you may know the school sits at the heart of the small village both literally (it is located on the town common) and figuratively (student exhibitions are often seen as learning events for the whole community). Over the past 5 years, multiple restructurings driven by financial necessity as well as multiple transitions in leadership have caused disruption to the central role the community plays in the school. While these restructurings have created additional instability in a time of incredible uncertainty, Cabot school's vision and commitment to community has never waived. The Community Schools legislation has validated Cabot's approach to teaching and learning while also providing an invaluable foundation for building coherence across and among the many interconnected relationships that define Cabot.

Today, I'm going to tell two stories about our work to help weave together the community school pillars. I will name the pillars explicitly as we come to them, but what I want you to take away is the complexity of this work and the necessity of seeing all pillars in the framework at once while staying focused on the near-term ones at hand. It is all important, but it cannot all be taken on at once.

The first story begins with two students who came into my office in the first week of school saying, "We want to start after school clubs." While afterschool had been a part of our conversation during the grant writing process over the summer, it was students who came with a vision for what those clubs should be like. They said, "we want to gather information from students in the younger grades about their interests and then information from students in the older grades to see what they might be willing to facilitate." Our student leadership committee (part of our collaborative leadership practices), took on this initial planning for afterschool. They surveyed students across grades 1-6. In November, when we were in the process of hiring a Community Coordinator, that small group met with her as a part of our interview process. They shared their ideas and elicited feedback and this began the beginning of their work together.

When our community coordinator started in December, this became the foundation of her work with community partners. The recreation committee, Cabot Community Theater, a music organization, the local library, and multiple members of the parent community all became collaborators of afterschool clubs alongside student mentors in grades 7 through 12, and staff. Our afterschool program (the first at Cabot in almost a decade), which opened in March, has been an incredible success. Students have the opportunity to engage in robotics, art, music, sports, craft making, museum visits, Abenaki heritage, and more. In this first iteration, we are thrilled to enroll over 50 percent of our

students in grades 1-6, facilitated by 14 middle and high school students, and partnering with 4 community partners. I hope you were able to hear the ways in which the pillars intertwined in the creation of our afterschool program. It stemmed from a need in the community, was driven by student voice, developed through collaborative leadership practices, engaged community and families in partnership, and ultimately has led to expanded and enriched learning time opportunities for all students in our school.

The second story is, perhaps, a little more mundane, but not less important to providing students with deep, meaningful, and connected learning experiences. It is a story that starts with building the capacity of the adults who work with our students. As I mentioned, Cabot School has been hit hard by fiscal challenges that have required multiple restructurings. It takes time for a community to stabilize after so much transition in ideal circumstances, and I think we can agree that these past two years have been less than ideal. So as we looked to create coherence and deepen student engagement and literacy through project-based learning, we began by

This past year we turned over almost our entire elementary staff and have 12 teachers new to Cabot and/or new to the field of education involved in our teacher mentoring program. This required us to focus on adult learning and capacity building in a new way with the end goal of retaining teachers who are invested in building out our vision of being a community school. We invested in building out a group mentoring model, led by two retired teachers who are culture keepers in our school community. They meet both individually and as a group; their express purpose is to balance building meaningful connections among the adults while also providing individualized support.

At the same time and with the support of the grant funding we invested in high quality professional learning related to project-based learning. As a result, all of our teachers have attended or will attend conferences locally and nationally and we will send a group of teachers to the Project Design Lab this summer to further deepen that work and we had the opportunity to work with EL Education, a leader in project-based design, to learn and grow the quality of our work. Lastly, we shifted time in our schedule so that teams had meaningful collaboration time to plan and digest their learning.

These professional learning experiences and the structures we have in place to support collaboration (read this as collaborative leadership) have deepened our project-based teaching and learning (integrated student supports). Students across grades engage in meaningful learning experiences, have access to books that are aligned to their projects (integrated student supports), and have been able to expand their learning beyond school through fieldwork and experts (expanded and enriched learning time opportunities). At this time, we expect a 90% retention rate for teaching staff.

These are just two instances that exemplify our work from this year. As we look to deepen and sustain this work in the future both fiscally and programmatically, we will deepen our emphasis on creating safe, inclusive and equitable learning environments. While we continue to build our trauma responsive and restorative practices, our students need us to continue our work with inclusion in order to meet

the needs of the range of learners that we serve. In the coming year, we will invest again in professional learning related to equity and inclusion (this builds on our work as a member of the Equity Practitioners Network and the work of our Supervisory Union with Inclusive Education). We will continue to build our community partnerships through internships for our seniors and use funding to continue to grow out projects that are rooted in community resources and relevant to the world around us. Our community coordinator will begin the task of looking at financial sustainability for these programs. I would urge you to also consider the fiscal challenge of maintaining the richness of these experiences for students so that we can sustain and grow them into the future.