

12.28.2021

To: Sen. Jane Kitchel, Senate Appropriations
Rep. Mary Hooper, House Appropriations

From: Sen. Alison Clarkson
Rep. Kathleen James

Re: COVID-related funding for independent career and technical education (CTE) districts

Dear Sen. Kitchel and Rep. Hooper:

We're writing to draw your attention to a **\$577,377 funding request**, for consideration in the **FY22 Budget Adjustment Act**, to address looming budget shortfalls at our state's **three independent career and technical education (CTE) districts**.

These centers are not eligible to receive ESSER funds and are grappling with COVID-related enrollment declines. For reasons outlined below, we believe they are uniquely challenged by the pandemic.

In recent weeks, we've met several times with JFO and with leaders from these three schools. This request is timely and urgent, as the centers are building budgets now to present to voters in March 2022. Assurance from the legislature, in the form of an appropriation in the FY22 Budget Adjustment Act, will help these districts to avoid budget cuts that would have a negative impact on curriculum, staffing and recruitment in FY23.

Vermont is home to 16 regional CTE centers. All are public schools, meaning any high-school student or eligible adult can attend, at no cost to the student. Of these, 13 are operated by public high schools, while three operate under an independent model. The three independent districts are River Valley Technical Center in Springfield, Southwest Technical Center in Bennington, and Hannaford Career Center in Middlebury.

LIMITED FUNDING OPTIONS

- Because they are not designated Local Education Agencies (LEAs), none of Vermont's 16 CTE centers have been eligible to receive direct aid through federal ESSER funds.
- Some of our 13 public CTEs have received pass-through ESSER funds from their governing LEAs. This is not an option for our three independent CTE districts.
- All of Vermont's CTE centers, including the independents, did receive early stimulus funding through the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund. GEER dollars were spent on direct COVID response — including technology and take-home equipment for students — and did not cover enrollment-related financial losses.
- In his recommended FY22 budget adjustment, Gov. Scott has included \$1.5 million in grants to CTE centers for "pandemic-related operations support." If shared among all 16 centers, the Governor's recommended amount would not make the three independent centers whole, so these two requests could be considered together.

ENROLLMENT DECLINE AND FINANCIAL IMPACT

- Vermont students enroll at our CTE centers by choice, and the centers then receive per-pupil funding based on student enrollments, calculated on a six-semester average. For this reason, enrollment is vital to financial stability.
- In-person student visits, which were suspended or strictly curtailed during the pandemic, are a key recruitment tool for CTE centers. Unless they take time to visit a regional tech center — to see and experience its hands-on, career-oriented curriculum — most students are unlikely to enroll.

- Because recruiting was negatively impacted by COVID, enrollment is down at our three independent centers to varying degrees. The attached spreadsheet shows a breakdown of their financial request, which would essentially hold the centers financially harmless for clearly identified COVID-related enrollment losses.
- Beyond recruiting, other pandemic-related impacts to CTE enrollment include: misaligned schedules due to hybrid or remote school schedules; lack of transportation for students on hybrid days; families deciding not to send students due to concerns about COVID transmission; and staffing challenges.
- The concept is to create a pool of funds, either from the General Fund or the Education Fund, that will be proportionately shared by the three independent CTEs based on each school's documented enrollment loss.

POSSIBLE LANGUAGE FOR BAA (from JFO)

- a. In fiscal year 2022 the amount of \$577,388 is appropriated on a one-time basis from the General Fund(?) Education Fund(?) [if Education Fund, 16 V.S.A. Sec. 4025(d) needs to be notwithstanding] to the Agency of Education for three independent career technical education centers that, because they are not part of a local education agency, were unable to access federal ESSER funds for COVID-19 related issues. The funds shall be distributed by the Agency of Education to the three independent career technical education centers as follows:
 1. \$313,781 to River Valley Technical Center School district;
 2. \$79,233 to Southwest Vermont Career Development Center School District; and
 3. \$185,374 to Patricia A Hannaford Career Center School District.
- b. The Agency of Education shall not release funds appropriated under subsection (a) of this section to a center until that center provides the Agency of Education with a detailed budget showing that the use of these funds are only for COVID-19 related costs that have not already been used as a basis for obtaining funding from other sources.

We have attached a letter and a financial breakdown from River Valley, Southwest Tech and Hannaford. We hope you will invite the leaders of these districts to testify, so they can explain the valuable contribution they make to Vermont's education landscape — and to discuss how they have been uniquely and negatively impacted by COVID, with fewer financial resources to rebound.

All best,

Sen. Alison Clarkson
Rep. Kathleen James