

Senate Education Committee Testimony

04/01/2022

Good Afternoon, for the record I'm Michelle Faust, I'm a resident of Irasburg and I am the Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Learning Services or NEKLS as we are commonly known.

SLIDE 1

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present to you today on behalf of the Vermont Adult Education and Literacy Network in regards to our Fiscal Year 2023 Request for Additional funding.

SLIDE 2

Our network is comprised of the four Adult Education and Literacy providers in the State; which includes: Central Vermont Adult Basic Education in green, Northeast Kingdom Learning Services in yellow, The Tutorial Center in pink and Vermont Adult Learning in blue.

As you can see, the AEL Network providers serve the entire state and are able to serve students regardless of where they live in the State.

Our request is for an additional 1.4 million dollars for FY 2023 to cover operational costs. As a Network, all four AEL providers took time to dig into our individual budgets to determine the funding we would need to be able to cover the operational costs for FY 2023. Through this process we identified 5 cost categories that are in need of additional financial support:

- Staffing salaries and benefits
- Technology needs and software upgrades
- Hardware, textbooks, supplies and other instructional materials
- Outreach and Recruitment
- Property maintenance and services

It is important to note that the House included \$700,000 in one-time funding for the AEL Network in its 2023 budget. However, it is also important to note that the 1.4 million is a real number that was identified through our individual and collective work and that we came to that number prior to the latest inflationary spike. Also, the additional \$700,000 beyond the House recommendation would mean that any student who walks through our doors, and at whatever level of need they present, that we are confident we could serve them and fully meet their basic academic, credentialing and career readiness needs.

SLIDE 3

Like many organizations and employers in Vermont, the AEL Network's operating costs have risen and are expected to continue to rise – in our initial response to providing remote learning options we had to quickly upgrade our technology and network systems, provide students with access to laptops and increased Internet bandwidth to accommodate teaching students using

Zoom and other Internet platforms. While these upgrades were immediate responses there is more work to be done to assure that we have a robust technology system to meet all of our student's needs. Upon reopening to in person instruction we were faced with the need for masks, sanitizers, and increased janitorial services and air purifiers. These needs have continued as COVID cases continue in our communities. We are already feeling the effects of increased heating and supplies costs due to rising fuel costs.

To respond to the loss of revenues associated with the pandemic we all have had to reduce expenses to continue to be able to provide services and we are as lean as we can possibly be and still be able to provide a level of high-quality services that our students require and deserve. We need additional funding in FY 2023 to be able to fill vacancies because of budget cuts and to hire additional staff as our student numbers are increasing. We also need to increase wages to be able to attract new staff and to retain our teachers who due to level or near level state and federal funding for years have not received adequate pay raises. We are having to compete against higher wages available in other educational sectors in Vermont and we need to be able to be competitive to retain our workforce so we have the necessary staff to serve the Vermonters that need our services.

We know that there are many more Vermonters who need our services and we cannot reach them without funding to support robust Outreach and Recruitment statewide.

With more students, the need for additional textbooks, supplies and other instructional materials comes as well.

Your support in providing our request for an additional 1.4 million dollars to the AEL Network will ensure that we can adequately serve and reach more Vermonters and help them to build the assets they need to move out of poverty successfully as well as build the confidence to move forward successfully as family members, citizens and workers throughout their lives.

SLIDE 4

The 2019 Community Survey of the US Census estimates that there are 36,000 out of school Vermonters without a high school credential. Statistically, this is our most vulnerable population, facing generational poverty, unemployment, and both food and housing insecurity. AELN is the first and only stop for these Vermonters to get that most important asset, a high school credential, which will open up jobs, earning potential (almost \$600 a month off the bat), and the ability to take advantage of the free college and career training programs that are being offered in the wake of COVID. AELN students gain assets, obtain jobs, and many go on to college and career training. Our investment in this particular demographic, through AEL, truly changes lives in individuals, families, and our communities.

SLIDE 5

We know the numbers – they tell us there are 36,000 Vermonters out there who need our services, annually we report the number of students served, the number of students who receive a high school diploma or GED – but the most important thing for us to remember is that behind

every number is a person, a Vermonter – who has goals and hopes and dreams for a better future and they come to us to help them realize those goals and dreams – they come to us seeking

- Basic skills instruction, in Reading, Writing and Math
- For Computer and financial literacy education
- For English Language Learning and US Citizenship preparation
- To earn a High School Diploma or GED credential
- For Transition to Career and College services to make sure they **are ready** to be successful in a CTE course or a college course or an apprenticeship.

Every number is a person, a person like Petagaye, Petagaye is pictured in the bottom right corner of this slide.

Petagaye dropped out of high school in Jamaica in 9th grade, when she got pregnant. As a single parent she worked menial jobs to provide for her daughter. She met a Vermonter, got married, obtained a green card after almost 2 years, and came to Lamoille County. She came with the American Dream, but it wasn't for her, it was for her daughter. Here, with little education and few skills, she worked in housekeeping to put her daughter through college, and then a master's program. Her daughter is now a practicing mental health counselor in Vermont.

Once Petagaye's American Dream for her daughter was realized, for the first time in almost 3 decades she could think of herself, and was able to formulate her own American Dream. Her first goal was to get her citizenship. She went to CVABE for both citizenship and English Language Learning. Petagaye and her daughter became citizens on the same day. Her pride when speaking of it is palpable.

The next steps of her American Dream were a high school credential, and an industry relevant credential that would lead to a career, something that she could never have in Jamaica. In May of 2021 Petagaye, with the support of CVABE, received her diploma. As part of her program she also obtained her LNA license, and she works in a care home, doing what she loves. Her life has been transformed. Although she credits AEL as being a "miracle," we know that it's because of her hard work and access to Vermont's Adult Education and Literacy services.

Petagaye had goals for her family, her academics, and for her career. Through her determination and CVABE's support she was able to realize them. In her time at CVABE she was in every program that AEL offers, from Citizenship to high school credentialing. Every one of our students across the State has a story, with history, goals, and pitfalls along the way. So many, like Petagaye, have changed their lives through our programs.

SLIDE 6

With an additional investment of 1.4 million for the Adult Education and Literacy providers, Vermont could extend regional workforce expansion, paid work based learning and training with a population that is already here – and that the State is already investing in through social support programs such as Reach Up, CTE, and free tuition.

By investing more funds into the Adult Education and Literacy providers you will be leveraging the Adult Education and Literacy system.

SLIDE 7

- Vermont has a prosperous economy
- Vermont's families are safe, nurturing, stable and supported.
- Vermont's children and young people achieve their potential

These are the State population level outcomes in statute. They are the guide posts for where we want to be as a State.

The vital work that the Adult Education and Literacy providers perform is a crucial piece in helping the State towards realizing these outcomes.

SLIDE 8

Between 2017 and 2021 AEL providers served over 10,000 Vermonters! These students came to us for many different reasons and had many kinds of success: from improving their skills to obtain a job or a better job, to earning a high school diploma or a GED, to achieving a certification or other credential for a job, to deciding that college was not only an option for them but a desire for them, to new Vermonters improving their English language abilities so that they could apply their skills and education from other countries to careers right here in Vermont

Over those 5 years, the average cost per student served by the AEL providers was a little over \$3,000 – you want to talk return on investment?

Students come to us at all skill levels, from no literacy or very low literacy all the way through middle school and high school literacy levels – much like a public school system would have a range of levels

70% of these students came to us with no high school credential and they came in at varying levels of literacy -16% of these completed in that five-year period, others are continuing to work on that goal for some it can take only a year or so, for others it can take 3,4 or 5 years depending on skill levels and life circumstances.

While they were in our program, roughly 700 obtained an IRC, earned a credential or entered a post-secondary or job training program. Keep in mind, these are people who would likely have never been able to do so if not for the AEL system and the services we provide. Although we do not have the data we do know that there are many more who likely obtained the IRC or college credential after they left our services.

We also had close to 1200 English Language Learners in our program, through their work with the AEL system they were able to begin to assimilate into American culture, to communicate with their children's teachers, to obtain employment, to utilize advanced degrees in their countries of origin and to become contributing members of our economy.

As we know, Vermont is actively seeking new refugees, AEL will be on the front line of providing English language and citizenship skills needed for their lives here.

SLIDE 9

Petagaye's story that I shared with you is but one of thousands – and there are goals, dreams and new stories yet to be realized for the 36,000 Vermonters that do not have a high school credential – and **you** can help to be sure those stories can become reality.

We ask that you support our request for an additional 1.4 million for the AEL Network providers for operational expenses in FY 2023.

I would like to thank you again for your time and for listening to this presentation, for supporting Vermonters who need our services, and for supporting the Vermont Adult Education and Literacy Network.

At this time, I would be more than happy to try to answer any questions you may have.