

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA
DATE: April 8, 2021
SUBJECT: Testimony on H.106

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about H.106. On behalf of the 13,000 teachers and school support staff members of Vermont-NEA we believe that H.106 will begin to address some of the most critical issues that affect students' ability to learn, families' ability to succeed and educators' ability to teach.

We all know the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on students and families and how it is has exposed and exacerbated many of the complex societal challenges and social inequities. However, for many years prior to the pandemic, we heard from educators across the state that they have a greater and greater number of students - especially in the earliest grades - coming to school unprepared to learn due to issues related to poverty, homelessness, mental health, and other challenges. What we hear from our members reflects the research that demonstrates that if children are concerned with where they will be sleeping that night, whether their family or caregivers are safe, or if they will have food over the weekend they will struggle to learn in schools. In April of 2019 we surveyed our members about various issues impacting education in Vermont. When asked about the current problems they are most concerned about in Vermont schools, 93 percent of educators identified the impact poverty and hunger are having on student learning. In the summer of 2017, the Generally Assembly convened the Adverse Childhood Experience Working Group of which Senator Lyons was a member. The working group heard from teachers, social workers, mental health professionals, doctors, and Vermonters about the impacts of trauma on our citizens and communities. Asked at a press conference about the release of the working group report, your colleague Rep. Donahue from Northfield said, "What surprised me the most was hearing testimony from our school systems, from teachers, about the really, really dramatic changes they're seeing in the kids that are coming into the primary grades connected with the opiate crisis". Over the past several years, this committee has heard about these challenges from Superintendents, school social workers, classroom teachers, school counselors and many others. These heart wrenching stories are hard to hear but happen every single day in every school, in every community across our state.

The reality is that our public schools may be the only safe place a child has during a day, week or year. Our public schools take every child and work incredibly hard to support them to be happy, healthy learners. Our schools currently provide so much more to support students and families than what schools did 15, let alone 50 years ago.

But the reality is that teachers and educators – try as hard as they might because of their deep commitment to the students they serve – can't also be a social workers, mental health clinicians,

housing advocates or any other professional with specialized training to meet the acute and systemic challenges facing our most vulnerable students and their families.

We believe that H.106, especially as we work to emerge from the pandemic, can create a path forward in Vermont to allow schools to deepen impactful and collaborative relationships with community stakeholders as well as State and local agencies to have a positive impact on both students and families. Done properly, community schools help address systemic inequities and therefore help create thriving schools and communities.

H.106 would build upon work that is happening across the nation to address the same challenges Vermont schools and students are facing. There are approximately 5,000 “community schools” across the United States that work to address the needs of the whole child which includes supporting the family. It is important to highlight that one advantage we have in Vermont is that our schools are already deeply integrated into the fabric of our towns and neighborhoods.

H.106 launches a pilot program that would allow up to 10 school districts across the state to deepen a comprehensive approach for their communities, their students, and their families. There are a few general points that I want to make and a few recommended changes.

- **The time is now** – We understand that there is a significant amount of work happening to support students and families and to build towards recovery. We believe H.106 aligns perfectly with that work and is the exact reason that now is the time to move forward.
- **Challenge by choice** – It is important to remember that this is not a requirement, but a pilot program that districts can choose to apply for. This will create opportunities for school districts that are ready to step into this work or build upon their existing work to do that in alignment with their recovery.
- **Site Based Leadership Team** – One of the critical components to the success of the community schools’ model is ensuring that there is deep and broad engagement and participation from stakeholders, including parents, community members, students, and school staff. This group collaborates deeply with the Community Schools Coordinator. H.106 as introduced had language reflective of this. We believe that H.106 can be strengthened by adding language about a site-based leadership team into the bill. There are two places it should be included:
 - Sec. 3 (a) – Definitions. We would recommend using language similar New Mexico’s community schools law passed in 2019 that reads ““site-based leadership team" means an interdisciplinary, school-based leadership team that includes the school principal, the community school coordinator, teachers, other school employees, families, community partners, tribal partners, nonprofit organizations, unions and neighboring community residents that guides collaborative planning, implementation and oversight;”
 - Sec 3 (d) 1 & 2 – Use of grant funding. Language should be added to make it clear that the community schools coordinator will do this work in collaboration with the “site-based leadership team” in both the development and execution of the community schools’ pilot.
- **Needs and Asset Assessment** – Community schools look different in every community because the needs of every community are different. Grounding the work in a needs and asset

assessment is critical. Since this is so critical to the success, we believe there should be some additional clarity in the bill about this assessment.

- Outline the key components of the needs assessment – H.106 as introduced had comprehensive language about what goes into the needs assessment. While it may not need to be as comprehensive as outlined in the bill as introduced, some key components should be outlined.
- Sec. 3 (d)1 – The needs and assets assessment should be added. Even if a school is building upon prior work, a needs and asset assessment done in collaboration with the site based leadership team should happen.
- **Equity** – Rep. James spoke to this when she introduced this bill in your committee. We believe a focus on social and racial equity should be further integrated into this bill. As Rep. James mentioned, Voice’s for Vermont’s Children has been engaged in this conversation and has some good suggestions. We would encourage you to hear from them and incorporate their recommendations.

Finally, I as I mentioned earlier, New Mexico passed a community schools law in 2019. As another predominately rural state, I would encourage the committee to hear from Dave Greenberg, one of the people deeply involved the passage of New Mexico’s law and it’s implementation. He is familiar with the work Vermont is doing to move forward this impactful whole child, whole community approach. I would be happy to pass along his contact information.