

To: Senator Champion

Senate Education Committee

RE: VT Education Equity Project Testimony on H. 106

Date: April 28, 2021

From: Deborah Lisi-Baker for Vermont Education Equity Project members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this Community School bill. I am with you today to speak on behalf of the Education Equity Project. Carlen Finn has shared a summary of suggested changes with you last week and members of the Education Equity Project are listening today as I highlight our deeply held conviction that equity is both the essential foundation of Community School strategies and should be the foundation for community school pillars. We believe a 5th pillar in the form of Just, Inclusive, and Equitable Learning Environments is necessary to move from a full-service community school model to a strategy that addresses not merely symptoms, but root causes of inequities.

Earlier this year, Rep. Tom Stevens reported on the eugenics legislation and said that we should look at every piece of legislation that comes before the Legislature with the intent of honoring the need to leave the history of eugenics behind us. Many of the groups who suffered most directly from eugenics (BIPOC people, people with disabilities, the poor, and new Americans, for example) are the same people we hope to see benefit from both this Community Schools legislation and the federal Education Recovery Funds. A clear commitment to equity makes this possible and the lack of an equity lens for both schools and partnering community organizations makes it uncertain.

If equity becomes a clear and visible 5th pillar, this bill and local community school strategies becomes a fulcrum for the disparate and fragmented equity initiatives of schools, educational associations, community providers, and local networks of youth and families who are developing important tools for promoting equity but have not found a way to come together in a strong shared partnership to offer real equity: in school climate, curriculum, mental health and social service practices, and in addressing trauma. Children and youth will not examine community schools from a state policy lens as legislators and advocates often do. They will experience what a community school is by their own daily and immediate experiences of equity or inequity in their classrooms, in their interactions with administrators and providers, by whether or not they see their history and lived experiences, their welcomed presence honored in the school curriculum and in the design of our play areas and places for learning. Looking at community school strategies through an equity lens brings together collaborative approaches to addressing the inequities so many children face while also making it possible for students, families, educators and community partners to be partners in

creating necessary and sustainable solutions to the very real challenges before us. (A list of some of the tools that could be used are included at the end of my testimony.)

We appreciate that the most recent version of this bill includes the assessment of assets as well as needs and that it broadens the groups to be represented in the site-based leadership team. We hope that students will be added to the team as **student voices are essential** to the process of designing strategies that engage students and lead to real and transformative work.

This morning I woke to a message from Morgan Brown, who is an advocate for homeless Vermonters and for people who have lived experience with trauma and mental health concerns. He reminds us that we cannot address needs unless we are able to see and celebrate the humanity of each person we try to help. He said, "What is most important to be mindful of when interacting with anyone, particularly someone experiencing an urgent degree of crisis in one manner or another, is that each individual person and their basic needs as well as humanity are essential. If their humanity ultimately becomes trampled upon, forgotten and eventually lost, then we all end up becoming trampled upon, forgotten and lost in the process as well; each of us, individually and then as a society."

For community schools to fulfill their promise we need to remember and build on the strengths of students and the resources and resilience of diverse community members so that each community school weaves together their own vibrant solutions and viable strategies. We need to acknowledge very real needs and challenges but never lose sight of the fact that every child and every adult has gifts to contribute and knowledge to share. And this we cannot do without making room for real equity and diversity in our schools and service agencies.

I also want to respond to Senator Lyons question yesterday, as to whether our recommendation for an equity focus and for a 5th pillar of Just, Inclusive, and Equitable Learning Environments would help schools and communities address health inequities relating to social determinants of health. I believe so. A strong commitment from both the school and community partners- working with students and families- to establish equitable and inclusive practices for both schools and partnering social services would help mitigate long standing health & social disparities and reduce discriminatory practices that contribute to health disparities. The community school site could be a place for students and families to access essential health, mental health and community services. Here is one example: Data from the 2016 to 2019 provided an alarming picture of the high number of Vermont children and youth experiencing hopelessness, depression and suicidal feelings. National research from those years indicated that rural states and communities face particular economic and geographic challenges in making needed mental health and trauma resources available to children. In addition, children and families from marginalized groups often mention the need for, and challenges in finding, respectful and responsive support. Community school partnerships that are deeply rooted in equity and justice can create solutions and address many of the health and social disparities these children face. Using an equity focus, site based services

can be designed to make it easier for students to access mental health and other services shaped to honor the gifts and respond to the needs of all children and youth in that school. It takes a shared commitment to innovation, respect and inclusion. Thank you for raising this important concern.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today!

Equity Tools in Vermont

At the curricular/classroom level: Liberatory Design framework

Example: Luke Dorfman, teacher at Winooski HS, uses this framework to develop senior capstone projects with students.

URL: <https://www.liberatorydesign.com>

At the school/building level: Equity Literacy Framework

Used extensively by Vermont Principals' Association in professional learning, including the Equity Practitioners Network.

URL: <https://www.equityliteracy.org//equity-literacy-definition>

At the district level: VSBA District Equity Policy

Recommended policy for district adoption statewide.

URL: https://b44bfd73-9878-43fe-a010-5ad36658c1f7.usrfiles.com/ugd/b44bfd_d8cf5ce210f64d77bd575f186e04c333.pdf

Comprehensive (individual, building, district, state level): AOE Equity Lens Tool

Recommended tool for use in centering equity at all levels of policy and practice.

URL: https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-equity-lens-tool_0.pdf)