

H.106 Testimony

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of the Community Schools bill, H.106.

For the record, my name is Doug Racine. I have served as a State Senator, Lieutenant Governor and Secretary of the Agency of Human Services.

H.106 is an important initiative, offering us a chance to build our schools back better. In fact, it could be a game changer for all our children, and especially those coming from homes in poverty.

The pandemic has exacerbated and shined a light on a deeply entrenched problem with Vermont's education system: children from low-income families do not do as well academically as their better off classmates. The challenges of learning from home this past year have been especially difficult for low-income families, and their children have fallen even farther behind. We are failing in our shared obligation to help all children get the quality education they need and deserve. Achieving the cherished American ideal of equal opportunities for all requires a greater commitment to overcoming the many barriers that low-income children often face.

When I served as Secretary of the Agency of Human Services it was painfully obvious to me that many of our social problems were either the result of growing up in poverty or resulted in poverty. Poor health, child neglect and abuse cases, and substance use disorders are frequently connected to lives of poverty. Chronic physical and mental health problems and many disabilities lead to lives of impoverishment. Many of our special education students are victims of malnourishment and trauma in their early years. The achievement gap, school dropout rates, and incarceration rates are all symptoms of something going wrong in the early years and throughout the school years.

What we have been doing obviously has not been working. A big part of the reason is that many children are arriving in kindergarten seriously behind their peers in emotional and intellectual development and social skills. Throughout all grade levels more and more children suffer from physical and mental health problems. Without focused attention in our schools, too many children become adult statistics.

It's time to try something different. Let's focus on prevention instead of just symptoms.

Federal stimulus funds targeted at schools and the Biden administration's commitment to reducing childhood poverty give us the opportunity to innovate, adapt, and reshape our schools. H.106 uses those federal funds, providing demonstration grants to 10 school districts to hire coordinators to develop and implement the community school model. It has already passed the House and is now being considered by the Senate.

Community schools operating as community centers would require the Agency of Human Services to be a stronger partner with our schools. The vision guiding community schools is that the supports our families and educators need to help kids learn should be found in our school buildings. Dental and health services, mental health counselors, pre-K programs, after-school and summer programs, family social services—all could be provided in our schools. These are not new services. They are all out there now but access is often difficult, especially in our rural areas.

Invite all those programs into the empty classroom spaces resulting from a declining school population. Some would provide badly needed revenue by paying rent. State government could locate social service and other offices there. Mental health centers could provide onsite counseling to students. Community members would be encouraged to organize after-school academic, artistic, and sports programs. Local seniors' meals programs could share the cafeteria. The possibilities are limited only by the vision of educators, state government, and community partners. What better way to keep our rural schools alive? As we try to entice young families to stay or move to Vermont, we need to have vibrant communities with local schools, not schools that are an hour's school bus ride away.

This is not a new idea. Bennington's Molly Stark Elementary School pioneered the model in Vermont in the 1990s. Schools in Burlington and Winooski and several others have many components of a community school. Over 5000 schools nationwide—rural and urban—have adopted and succeeded with this model. It is long past time for Vermont to do the same.

I make the following suggestions:

1. The in-school services are social service programs and should be funded by the General Fund after the stimulus funds used for the demonstration grants are used up. This proposal is for a new model, and it is not a new program. After the model is established, with the full support of the Agency of Human Services, I do not anticipate new costs. In fact, the model envisions a more cost efficient and effective system of providing existing services to children and their families. This is not an opportunity to shift more GF services to the Education Fund!

2. There needs to be a position added to the Agency of Education for developing the grants, offering technical assistance, evaluating grant proposals, implementing the model, and evaluating outcomes. This proposal will not succeed without a dedicated position in the AoE. It can be a limited service position.

3. A formal statutory requirement for AHS involvement is essential. The proposal will not succeed without the commitment such a requirement represents. The model clearly envisions providing services funded by AHS in our school buildings. I suggest coordination with AoE and schools be added to the responsibilities of the Director of Trauma Prevention in the Office of the Secretary of AHS, as found in Title 33, Chapter 34.

I urge support of H.106.