

Addendum: Testimony on H.106 – Community Schools

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D., Deputy Secretary

Date: April 26, 2021

Please see the highlighted information below, as an addendum to testimony provided on 4/23/21.

AOE agrees with the findings and purpose of this bill. It is critical that Vermont's education system work collaboratively with other entities to ensure that all students are healthy, both physically and mentally, and ready to learn. In addition, we support district efforts to work collaboratively with families, and all staff and educators, to bring about these goals. We also agree that an approach focused on our most vulnerable families and students is critically important. Indeed, this is why Vermont's [education recovery framework](#) requires districts to, by June 1, address each of these areas in their local plans for mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

Although we agree with the intent of the bill and its ultimate goals, AOE does not support this bill due to the concerns discussed below.

Concerns

1. Timing. Most importantly, the timing of this state-run grants program does not align with COVID-19 education recovery efforts already underway. As of COB 4/21/21, approximately 58% of districts had submitted their needs assessments, with another 30% requesting an extension of 1-3 weeks as they finalize information gathering and analysis. Next, State Support Teams comprised of staff from AOE, DMH, and DCF will assist districts with crafting one-year recovery plans for addressing those needs, due on June 1. Implementation of these plans will begin on June 1 and extend throughout the 2020-2021 school year and beyond. As such, district and school personnel will be largely engaged in recovery planning, as well as finalizing end-of-school year operating logistics.

H.106 anticipates that schools and/or districts will: (1) learn about and fully understand the significant programmatic enterprise of community schools, (2) plan/design a coherent approach that will be successful, and (3) work on a grant application over the summer in time for September 1 funding, after navigating a pandemic and developing a required year-long recovery plan. We believe this is an unrealistic goal for most districts. It also may inadvertently consume scarce personnel resources that would be better spent preparing for the fall semester's recovery implementation. We do not believe many districts, particularly those who would most benefit from a community schools approach, will be ready to apply this coming summer.

Instead, as I previously testified to House Education in February, AOE strongly advises pushing this initiative out until next session and fiscal year. By this time, districts will be more operationally stable (having successfully navigated the pandemic), have a better understanding of student and family needs, and be better positioned to implement innovative programs, including a community schools approach.

As an alternative, we suggest that the AOE use the coming year to ensure that Vermont's districts and schools are made aware of the community school approach, including boosting understanding of exemplary models both within Vermont and nationally, as well as understanding how to plan for, implement, and evaluate the success of community schools initiatives at the local level. Currently, the field is likely only partially aware of all the benefits this model may offer. We need time to educate practitioners about the approach. This would fit in well with other ongoing recovery work this coming year.

Finally, building in a current requirement for a new position of "community schools coordinator" when districts have just identified a "[recovery coordinator](#)" as part of required state education recovery efforts (all districts submitted this information on or before March 15) might be confusing. Rather, if we wait just one more year, at which time initial recovery efforts will be well underway, it is likely that the work of the recovery coordinator and a potential community schools coordinator will significantly overlap. In other words, the recovery coordinator could easily slide into a community schools coordinator position at the local level.

2. **Funding.** Given the significant federal dollars directly allocated to districts across CARES, CRRSA, and ARPA, it may be more logical and fiscally prudent that districts use their local dollars to fund community school initiatives. Districts will have enough funds over the course of the next 3-4 years to undertake this work. It makes less sense to use Education Fund dollars for a voluntary grant program that will benefit only a few at present and could be supported by another funding stream.

In addition, there currently exists a federal US DOE program, the [Full Service Community Schools Program](#), that Vermont schools can directly apply to for this work. From the Federal Register (1/15/21), "this program provides support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination, integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families, particularly for children attending high-poverty schools, including high-poverty rural schools." Given this fact, we worry that the proposed state initiative in H.106 is duplicative and would potentially present an inefficient use of state resources.

As important precursors for an expansive initiative such as a statewide community schools approach, AOE plans to focus on the following activities during the next year:

- (1) improving and expanding fiscal models and infrastructure so that local mental health practitioners, service providers and districts can more effectively provide integrated service delivery models in all regions,

(2) ensuring that the physical properties and locations of our education facilities are healthy and safe for all students and educators, and

(3) addressing unfinished learning by expanding capacity for remote learning. AOE is considering strategic uses of one-time funds and trying to avoid creating future liability for programs that cannot be sustained past the period of performance, which ends FY 2024.

3. Partnerships with Mental Health.

A successful community school initiative will require significant support and buy in from mental health resources in the community and state. We recommend that the Committee hear from both state officials at the Vermont Department of Mental Health and representatives from local Designated Agencies about the feasibility of a statewide community school initiative for this coming school year.