

To: Senator Campion
Senate Committee on Education
From: John Downes, Director, Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education
College of Education and Social Services, University of Vermont
Re: Comments upon H.106, Community Schools Act
Date: May 4, 2021

Thank you, Chair Campion, and members of the committee for an opportunity to share comments regarding the H.106, the Community Schools Act.

Prior testimony regarding H.106 to the House Committee on Education and this committee have emphasized the unique and compelling opportunities Vermont's current legislative and policy landscape presents for community schooling, particularly with regard to Act 77, Act 1, and, most immediately, initiatives to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. One aspect of the proposed community schools legislation, expanded learning opportunities, converges significantly with work already under way many Vermont schools. Clarifying this convergence may inform how H.106 can build on existing work, help frame how community schooling can extend (rather than compete with) ongoing priorities, and increase the viability of demonstration projects to drive statewide work to create robust community schools.

Vermont's ambitious efforts to improve learning creates unique opportunities to realize the full promise of community schools. Schools, districts and their communities are likely in different stages of developing the four pillars of community schools referenced in H.106: integrated support services, family and community engagement, collaborative leadership, and expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities. For instance, in response to Act 77's Flexible Pathways legislation, some schools are already deeply engaged with community partners to provide students more engaging, responsive, and real-world learning opportunities that redefine when, where and with whom learning occurs. They are leveraging personalized learning plans, assessment of transferable skills, and innovative transcripts to integrate experiences that span traditional school walls and schedules into the core of schooling. In short, by leading with an ambitious interpretation of expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, these schools are on a viable path to develop an essential pillar of comprehensive community schools.

On its website, the Coalition for Community Schools, extensively cited in the Learning Policy Institute's report, characterizes personalized and expanded learning opportunities [ELOs] as a core component of community schools. The Coalition proposes reimagining the traditional school day in ways that speak directly to Vermont's ongoing development of flexible pathways:

Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problems.ⁱ

Community schools utilize innovative approaches that expand learning opportunities before, during, and after school, during the summer and/or by extending the school day and year.ⁱⁱ

Further, the Coalition highlights how expanding learning opportunities converge with the multi-stakeholder collaborations central to the four pillars of community schools:

As more localities continue to explore new ways for providing ELOs for their students to prepare them for college, career, citizenship, and life, the community schools strategy will provide a vehicle and vision for creating and sustaining partnerships for successful learning opportunities. Looking into the future, it will be essential for community schools and expanded learning opportunities advocates and practitioners to work together.ⁱⁱⁱ

In many respects, Vermont is ahead of the rest of the country in developing a system of flexible pathways that embraces the Coalition's vision of expanded learning opportunities. If the H.106 moves forward, the state has an opportunity to creatively build on these achievements to demonstrate what community schools can look like in Vermont.

ⁱ Coalition for Community Schools. *Engaging Instruction*.

<http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/engaginginstruction.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Coalition for Community Schools. *What is a Community School*.

http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute for Educational Leadership & Coalition for Community Schools. *The Growing Convergence of Community Schools and Expanded Learning Opportunities*.

http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/ExecSummary_TheGrowingConvergenceofCommunitySchoolsandExpandedLearningOpportunities.pdf