



Voices
for Vermont's Children

To: Senator Brian Campion, Chair
Senate Committee on Education
From: Carlen Finn, Senior Policy Associate
Voices for Vermont's Children
Re: S.16 Testimony

For the record, I am Carlen Finn, Senior Policy Associate for Voices for Vermont's Children. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

In 2016, Voices for Vermont's Children released its report, [Education Matters: The Impacts of Systemic Inequity in Vermont](#). As the title suggests, the report examines inequities in our education systems. Whether it is persistent gaps in reading and math proficiency, lower four-year graduation rates and (higher dropout rates), unequal access to afterschool programs or disparities in disciplinary practices, the data reveal who is systematically disadvantaged and harmed by these inequities – BIPOC, low-income, (dis)abled, immigrant, English language learners, and LGBTQIA students. These data tell me that these (and other) disparities are linked and are not isolated problems that can be eliminated one by one.

My question for the committee is this: Do we really need another advisory group or task force to tell us what we already know? Rather than assembling another committee that will take time and resources, can the legislature, instead direct the Agency of Education to collect discipline/exclusion data and require timely reporting? This approach would allow a task force to spend their time meaningfully focused on identifying best practices that address discipline policy and other related inequities (truancy, academic supports).

If the Committee decides to move forward with creating a Task Force on School Discipline Reform I have some suggestions for the findings section and for the make-up of the Task Force and its focus.

- Page 1, line 17. While the most recent AOE report shows the majority of incidents coming from this age range, it also reports 1,954 from grades K-5 (27% of the total [total: 7,325]) and of these, 462 were in grade K and 1 alone.
- Page 2, line 18. Recommend specific data that break down by student "group" to highlight the disparities in exclusionary discipline. [Page 77 of the AOE's 2017 Exclusionary Discipline Response report](#).
- Page 3, line 3. Recommend adding the Disability Law Project's concern here or in data collection section on page 8, starting with line 7. In addition to collecting data on the number of days students serve in out of school suspensions, districts must be required to collect and report on the number of instances where students experience shortened

school days, e.g., are not formally suspended, but sent home for disability-related behavior.

- Page 4, line 5. Youth and families are currently being disciplined for truant behavior, therefore we need to make sure truancy is specifically included in the work of any School Disciplinary Advisory Council (Sarah Ballou, MA CMHC Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) Coordinator. We have heard from folks in restorative justice work that absenteeism leading to truancy is of critical concern and shouldn't be separated from "discipline"
- Page 4, line 13. Recommend different method for appointments to the Task Force.
 - Identify alliances or organizations that will appoint the majority of members such as the DD Law Project and the DDC; Vermont RP practitioners network, VT Family Network, Education Justice Coalition.
- Page 4, starting with line 13. Recommend additional members
 - RP practitioners, and community justice centers who focus on absenteeism and truancy
 - Independent researchers (data)
- Page 6, line 1. The discussion about School Resource Officers ([S.63](#)), if there is going to be one, should also be part of this conversation. It would be impossible, for example, to implement a more universal set of policies addressing discipline across the state if the use of SRO's remains (as the Governor has just said he thinks it should) a truly local decision.

We also recommend as suggested in written testimony that restorative justice and practice lead the research into best practices with a focus on both discipline and truancy.

"I believe what is needed going forward is a policy that supports Restorative Practices and Approaches in all schools in the state. The aim of **restorative practices** is to develop community and to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and building relationships. It is time for progressive action to fund, train and implement a consistent, comprehensive and action oriented RP model so schools can begin to dismantle disciplinary policies that are harmful to marginalized student populations. The evidence exists that harmful practices have been in place for far too long and only drive disconnection. Students and faculty need to know that they matter and are seen, heard, validated and belong before they can engage in an academic environment. What a statewide RP policy can offer is a path for the voices that have been muted to have a seat at the table and ask those of us who have benefited from the advantages founded in colonial ideals to own our part in the marginalizing communities of color."

Finally, we recommend fully funding the Task Force to fully support diverse participation.

BIPOC, low-income, (dis)abled, immigrant, ELL, and LGBTQIA students cannot afford for us to wait any longer to begin addressing the systemic inequities and discriminatory practices that have shaped their lives for too long. As you determine your next steps, please consider how this work could lead to real change with the immediacy that this situation requires.

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully submitted by: Ellen Cooke, School Counselor, U-32 Middle-High School

Date: 2/10/2021

Comments on S.16 - School Discipline

I am a School Counselor, Restorative Practice Trainer and Facilitator. I am not convinced at this time in our present culture, that there is a need for a School Discipline Advisory Council. We know the injustices and inequalities that exist for BIPOC and disabled students within our educational institutions. I believe what is needed going forward is a policy that supports Restorative Practices and Approaches in all schools in the state. *The aim of **restorative practices** is to develop community and to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and building relationships.* It is time for progressive action to fund, train and implement a consistent, comprehensive and action oriented RP model so schools can begin to dismantle disciplinary policies that are harmful to marginalized student populations. The evidence exists that harmful practices have been in place for far too long and only drive disconnection. Students and faculty need to know that they matter and are seen, heard, validated and belong before they can engage in an academic environment. What a statewide RP policy can offer is a path for the voices that have been muted to have a seat at the table and ask those of us who have benefited from the advantages founded in colonial ideals to own our part in the marginalizing communities of color.

U-32 uses the RP model to foster accountability when harm has been caused and move forward in a caring, equitable way. All of our faculty are trained in RP and use proactive circles to build relationships, brave spaces and familiarity with circle work so when a responsive circle happens students/faculty can show up without surprise of what is happening. Since we have implemented RP we have retired detention. In its place there is a program called "community" which is led by students who are trained in RP. . Over the past 3 years the need for community declined and as a result of this practice, recidivism declined. I have witnessed the power of responsive circles, large and small alike. U-32 is committed to this practice and it is a practice. We make sure that some of our professional development is devoted to RP. We know that if our faculty does not have the support and ongoing training then unintentional harm may be caused and relationships suffer. Relationships are at the center of this work.

Thank you for considering these words and sentiments.

Ellen Cooke

Date: February 10, 2021

To: Senator Brian Campion, Chair
Senate Committee on Education

From: Evelyn Monje, Winooski High School student and Youth Program Specialist, UP for Learning
Lindsey Halman, Executive Director, UP for Learning

Re: S. 16

Over the course of the past 13 years, UP for Learning has worked with high schools, middle schools, and a growing number of elementary schools in Vermont, as they work toward systemic transformation, engaging all learners, and increasing the authentic voice of youth in learning and decision-making. UP contributes to the capacity of youth organizations across VT and beyond to challenge racial inequities and raise up youth voices as they lead us to a public education system that is accessible, equitable and radically inclusive of everyone. This means expansively modifying boundaries in a way which creates a difference in the possibilities for engagement, as well as creating spaces that are more accessible, welcoming and inclusive of BIPOC youth and adults. Over the past two years, our work with schools integrating youth-adult partnership and restorative practices has been one of our biggest growth areas.

We appreciate your willingness to develop a School Discipline Advisory Council that represents diverse perspectives from the educational system in Vermont. We are particularly grateful to see the addition of youth as members of this council and we hope that the youth chosen for the Council will be BIPOC youth and/or youth with (dis)abilities.

At the same time, the data is very clear about who is being suspended and expelled from schools and who is not. This seems like an inefficient use of time for this proposed Council. Rather, moving to transformative policy that ensures that educational equity is a right for all Vermont youth must be prioritized. For example, policy, as proposed in S.63 an act relating to the prohibition of school resource officers is a clear example of the transformative policies that need to be put in place to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in the disciplinary data.

It must be recognized that it is easier to fall back on gathering data and analyzing the findings, but at this point in time, it is clear that that is not what is necessary. When thinking about moving forward in terms of disciplinary action, we have all the data, the next steps include action. In Winooski School District we often return to our data to make sure that we are on track, but the real shift towards action has been we have allowed space for emotional testimonies and restorative practices to guide our work. In order to create real, systemic change it is essential that we begin to look at this work from a human perspective rather than the perspective of tradition or "what we have always done". For this transformation to truly reflect the communities these school systems

represent, there must be practices in place to hear from the representative community. This is the change that is beginning in Winooski, and must begin across the state.

Over the past decade, there have also been many restorative justice practitioners working to support schools in the implementation of restorative practices to increase a sense of safety and belonging for Vermont students. There is clear data that these approaches are best practices for all schools. Therefore, it is imperative that voices of these practitioners are reflected in the makeup of the Advisory Council.

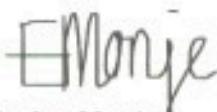
In 2019-2020, the Agency of Education provided one year of funding for the [Restorative Approaches Collaborative](#) (final report), led by UP for Learning and UVM's BEST Project, to support 7 schools and 3 school districts with the foundational learning and coaching needed to integrate Tier 1 restorative practices (community building) into their schools. Implementation science shows that in order for systemic change to occur it requires a deep commitment to change over 3-5 years (at a minimum). This requires training, coaching, time and support for educators, students and families. This involves resources to support schools in understanding the importance of Tier 1 (community building) practices as the foundation of this change, and how this paradigm shift will ultimately create safer schools where young people feel they belong. One year of funding is not enough to support systemic change. We hope that this will be a consideration for this committee as you think about the purpose of this Advisory Council.

This will also require a paradigm shift in policies that transform, rather than reform and would eliminate suspensions and expulsions for Vermont students. It is essential that transformative policy takes shape to require all schools to move from a punitive disciplinary system to a restorative one.

We ask that if this Council is indeed created, it will be an action-oriented Council that listens to the voices of marginalized youth and adults to create new policies that provide an educational system where all students can attend.

Thank you for taking the time for us to share our testimony.

Sincerely,



Evelyn Monje
Youth Program Specialist



Lindsey Halman
Executive Director