

S. 162 Testimony for VPA  
Wednesday, February 9th, 2022

Good afternoon, my name is Chris Young and I am currently the principal at North Country Union High School. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on the potential impact that allowing teachers to interview and accept new positions until June 15th would have on students in Vermont. I would first like to acknowledge that I, like most of my administrator colleagues, was once a teacher, and I recognize the importance of maximizing earning potential and making choices that are best for myself and my family. However, ultimately as a principal, I am responsible for the best interests of my students, and S.162 appears to me to have the potential to perpetuate, and perhaps widen, inequities that exist in our most marginalized communities.

This is my 20th year as a principal in VT, all of which have been in the Northeast Kingdom. I was principal in Craftsbury for 8 years, Troy for 9 years, and have begun my 3rd year at North Country this year. These experiences have led me from one of the smallest high schools in the state, to one of the most economically disadvantaged schools in the state, and finally to my present position as the principal at the high school for a supervisory union with one of the largest geographic regions in the state. I feel that the combination of these experiences have provided me with a unique perspective on the impacts of teacher turnover on schools and students.

As principal in Craftsbury one of our main challenges was retaining young teachers who were perhaps more interested in being in a more populated area such as Stowe, or Waterbury. Back when we had multiple applicants for a position, we could anticipate that a young teacher's tenure would often be short and we would be faced with high turnover, which in a small school has significant ramifications. It is difficult enough to address this turnover in late spring. However, if, for instance, the AP math teacher in Craftsbury, or the art teacher, or the Forestry teacher left on June 14th, even in a favorable labor market it would be incredibly difficult to find replacements by the beginning of the year and those programs may not run.

In Troy, the challenges were a bit different in that many of our teachers often lived in Franklin County which is close enough to St. Albans for teachers to be aware of, and often actively seek information on, the disparities in salary between a Northeast Kingdom school and one closer to Chittenden county. As you may be aware, schedules in small schools are generally built by hand and take into account specific staff skill sets and expertise, as well as several part-time staff members' schedules in order to provide the services and programming that students need and deserve. In this case, if the Troy reading specialist or special educator departed, many aspects of the entire schedule would need to be redone within a few weeks with little opportunity for dialogue or collaboration, assuming, again, that we could even find a replacement.

And finally at North Country, trying to fully staff a school in the midst of a pandemic while adding positions using ESSER funds has been a challenge. Our focus for ESSER money has been to invest in personnel who can provide students with support to recapture lost learning opportunities, as well as maintain progress as they re-engage in a more normal school year. We

have built an entire system of intervention based on these positions, which has required extensive planning and discussion during the school year. To be potentially faced with losing one or more teachers late into June and having to rebuild the system and rehire positions without the opportunity to gather input and work collaboratively with our staff, would severely impact our ability to implement interventions to effectively support our students.

Allowing teachers to leave contracts up until June 15th would make all of these challenges worse. My work to plan for upcoming years is predicated on having the ability to work with staff based on what we know to be our staffing patterns for the following year. Once teachers leave for the summer, it is much more difficult to engage in collaborative work, and instead the work becomes more 'top-down' decision-making, which often has the result of push-back if we do not have the ability to build consensus and share the 'why' behind the decisions. This work includes developing programs of study, needs-based professional development, and systems and structures to support students' social-emotional and academic needs. If schools were to have to put this work on hold until after June 15th, we would be left with changes to schedules, trainings, and programs that would need to be made within a few short weeks and with little opportunity for collaboration. Given the added context of an historically tight labor market on the heels of a pandemic that has stretched our human resources to the point of breaking, it is difficult for me to understand the rationale behind endorsing a bill that would exacerbate the existing staffing crisis in schools who serve our most marginalized populations.

I will leave you with a brief story about the impact that late teacher resignations have on students. At the end of last year, we employed a part-time school counselor as a member of a four person team. Given the student need that we were anticipating upon returning from the hybrid learning environment, we were looking forward to bringing this person in as a full-time counselor to increase our overall capacity to respond to the overwhelming social and emotional needs of our students. Unfortunately, due to many factors, the person accepted a position in another supervisory union and we were not notified until August. The position has been posted for the entire school year and we have received two applications, neither of which were from a viable candidate. The position remains unfilled today. I don't tell you this story out of spite or anger, as I always have and always will, support teachers to make the best decisions for themselves and their families, but the fact is, and this is the bottom line, the longer the time period in which teachers can move into different positions with other schools, the more likely it will be that the positions they leave will go unfulfilled and that students will suffer. I urge you to consider the collateral damage that allowing teachers to opt out of contracts in June would cause and affirm superintendents' authority to uphold locally agreed upon deadlines for contracts.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, and thank you for your service to Vermonters.