

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: January 4, 2022
RE: Covid School Update

Good afternoon. I'm Jeff Fannon, the executive director of Vermont-NEA for the past 5 years and before that I served as the general counsel of Vermont-NEA. I'm here today representing 13,000 educators across the state. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and I will keep my remarks brief but I'm happy to answer question along the way or afterwards. The brevity of my statement, however, does not reflect the gravity of the multiple issues our educators face today. I want to make clear, my comments today are largely guided by what we are hearing directly from members. Educators have been digging deep and doing their best for their students, but I am worried about them and their well-being. I want to thank all educators, and I note, Senator Chittenden, that your wife is a teacher and I want to thank her, and I hope you pass that along.

The social and emotional well-being of our students and staff must be a top priority the remainder of this year and certainly for the next several years as we recover from the ongoing pandemic. Focusing on the well-being of every student allows educators to create a safe, secure, and inclusive school environment. Every school must be a sanctuary for every student, so please examine our state policies to assure that they prioritize the well-being of our students and the quality of the school climate.

By way of example, we need to de-emphasize standardized testing and, instead, return to the joy of teaching. Students want to learn and teachers want to teach, nobody wants to be tested, and the silliness of conducting these standardized test during a health crisis boggles the mind, frankly. The test and punish concept that came out of the No Child Left Behind law of 2001 has hurt education, and while we cannot fix that federal law, we need to de-emphasize as much as possible these standardized tests, especially now. The reliance on these test scores is misguided. For reasons we all know—pandemic, remote learning, and low student attendance generally just to name a few—the data is simply invalid and not worthy of anyone's time and attention. Vermont can and should be creative and figure out ways to avoid putting any standardized testing pressure on students or staff at this time. Instead, we should focus all of our attention on the social emotional learning of students. Because we are focused elsewhere and on other things, we have too many priorities, which means we have no priorities, and that is dangerous right now. Student behaviors that we are hearing of are a call for help by students, and the school system needs to heed that call. Last year we heard that social emotional learning and "recovery" would be the focus, but what we are seeing is an attempt to get back to normal at any cost, including focusing on standardized tests and that is unwise and unhealthy.

We have heard and read multiple stories about the workforce shortage, and I can say it is absolutely true. Shortages are across the board and across the state, including in Chittenden

County. These shortages are both short and long-term. We knew this was a problem in many parts of the state before the pandemic and it is worse now. Lowering teacher standards, however, is not the answer. We know there are shortages of doctors, but we are not and should not lower standards for doctors or for teachers. Perhaps we can develop a plan to create a state college that focuses on teacher prep. We can and should address massive student loans by providing relief to teachers, and we should focus even more so on our current students of color to recruit them into the teaching profession. Likewise, we should also start a state program to encourage para-educators to become teachers. Employing these strategies might address both short and long-term shortages.

These shortages are very real and what we are hearing is it is leading to larger class sizes. These shortages are also driving educators out of the classroom because they are burning out. Just yesterday Senator Sanders, Governor Scott, Pro Tem Balint and Speaker Krowinski all spoke about the nursing shortage and like nurses, there is a shortages of teachers that pre-dates the pandemic.

We need to retain the teachers we have and then focus on attracting new teachers. For example, a retention bonus might be a good idea to retain teachers. And, to be blunt, pensions are a topic of concern, and when teachers hear their pensions may be cut, that is likely having an impact on their decisions about whether to stay in the profession after this most difficult year. (And, this year has been the most difficult of the three pandemic school years.) The pension issue includes administrators, as they too are in the teacher retirement system.

The state now has more than 800 teachers on a provisional license, which is more than double from my memory, and while some are licensed teachers teaching out of their area of endorsement, many are truly unlicensed new teachers. And to put a fiscal note to this issue, both emergency licensed and provisionally licensed teachers do not contribute to the teacher pension plan, which erodes that plan by shorting the plan of teachers' contributions. Perhaps in desperation, the State's ARPA plan, which I now understand was recently approved by the US DOE, calls for expanding the state's reliance on provisionally licensed teachers, but I do not believe that is good education or fiscal policy for the state to advance.

While we often see the term "teacher shortages" in the headlines, the shortage includes school bus drivers, para-educators, custodial and maintenance staff, nurses, counselors, administrators, food service workers, and every job classification in education. As you debate the critical issues facing public education today, please take a moment to look through the lens of workforce development, which I think Secretary of Education French just said might be part of the Governor's address tomorrow.

One lesson we know now to be true is that our public schools are an extension of the state's healthcare system. During COVID, schools have been an integral part of that system for our children and youth. Our school nurses have worked tirelessly to provide services and support to students throughout the pandemic and need to be further supported by the Department of Health, community-based health care providers, and other state and local agencies. As one teacher said to us recently, "Yes, I'm busy and stressed this year, but I'm really worried about our school nurse. She is simply overwhelmed." As you discuss policy decisions this session, we ask that you explore ways to make sure that our public schools are seen as communities of healing, not just academic institutions, and that we have policies and rules that promote cooperation amongst healthcare providers, agencies, and schools. This, of course, includes the important area of mental health.

The recent changes to quarantining guidance needs to be clarified and messaged better. Having parents conduct the test to stay program is worrisome to educators. Much about the recent spike in cases is worrisome to our schools, but schools are but a reflection of our communities and the spread of the virus therein.

The public school system is under great stress right now. Not adding to that stress would be helpful, for example no new initiatives would be a recommendation we support.

Thank you for your attention today and thank you for your commitment to public education, the cornerstone of democracy in America.