

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: January 27, 2022
RE: Discussion about Waiver of Standardized Testing

Good afternoon. I'm Jeff Fannon, the executive director of the 13,000 member Vermont-NEA. Thank you for your focus on the working conditions of educators with an eye towards giving teachers the autonomy to make their working conditions and their students' learning conditions the best they can be. We know that working conditions, along with salary and benefits, are the most significant reasons why teachers decide whether to stay in the profession.

You invited me here today to have a conversation about standardized tests required by federal law, and the possibility to waive that requirement. At the outset, I do understand that these tests are a federal requirement, and a waiver of that obligation requires an act of Congress, so that is a practical reality about which we should all be aware.

Having said that, it may be good to know what Vermont educators are saying about these tests, this year especially. In essence, educators are spending time preparing for these tests instead of working with students or preparing to work with students. During the toughest of the three pandemic school years, this is time away from the critical mission of schools—teaching students, including addressing students' social and emotional learning needs. Educators, therefore, are frustrated with words saying we need to focus on students and their needs but they are not seeing the words put into action when it comes to these standardized tests. Educators are doing the necessary prep work and will administer standardized tests as they always have since the “test and punish” system started under No Child Left Behind, but their frustration with words not matching action is real.

Earlier this month, you asked me to connect with the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation to consider a proposal about how best to reduce the financial burdens educators suffer from and which, ultimately, make the profession less attractive for aspiring educators and current teachers. I met with VSAC this week and we discussed some existing programs that could be tailored to meet the needs of educators. For example, VSAC has a \$6,000 per year nursing scholarship program that results in forgivable student loans for nursing students, which includes a work component. VSAC also is working in the Teacher Apprenticeship Program at Champlain College that might be able to be tweaked to become a more attractive option to aspiring educators. These two programs are structured with loan forgiveness as the carrot. We also discussed the possibility of outright grants to current school employees who want to become licensed teachers. There may be more possibilities but this was the extent of our conversation. Finally, other states may serve as models, for example New York and New Mexico have programs that are designed to increase the number of teachers in underserved areas; while we discussed other states' teacher programs, it was clear from the conversation that any new program would have to fit within VSAC's mission.

There are other state programs that might be workable. Maryland, for example, has a free community college program that gives aspiring teachers free college tuition at state schools if the student's GPA is above 3.0.

Traditionally, NEA conducts an aspiring educator conference each summer, but that has been cancelled of late because of the pandemic. We hope the conference can happen again this summer. The conference gives students a chance to connect with one another and see what resources are available.

As the attached July 2021 NEA report makes clear, student loan debt is staggering. The executive summary alone, at pages 3 and 4, paints a student loan crisis of unimaginable proportions amongst educators nationally. This crisis, in the wealthiest nation in the world, is offensive, and it is hurting our economy. Vermont should begin now to help Vermont educators who carry this debt. Please don't over-think a solution—loan forgiveness for educators can and should be enacted.

Finally, there is a direct connection between the waiver of standardized testing issue and the retention and recruitment of teachers. The working conditions of teachers must not drive teachers out of the profession. If we do not return to the joy of learning and away from the "test and punish" system we have now, we will never be able to retain and recruit educators. No matter how many educators we attract into the education system, if we simply bring them in only to have them leave soon thereafter, we will be wasting our time and resources.

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