

January 18, 2024

Representative Lori Houghton
Representative Peter Conlon
115 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05633

Dear Chairperson Houghton and Chairperson Conlon,

Thank you for welcoming our colleagues to speak at your joint committee meeting on mental health in schools on January 17th, 2024. We appreciate the opportunity to share about successes and challenges and are grateful for the important work being done by the House Health Care and Education Committees. This letter reviews key points and addresses some of the questions and comments that arose.

Success Beyond Six (SB6) represents a robust 30-year partnership between schools, families, and Designated Agencies (DAs) across the state. SB6 has three main programs [1) School-Based Clinical Services, 2) School-Based Behavioral Services, and 3) Concurrent Education Rehabilitation and Treatment (CERT)] with each program being grounded in trauma-informed practices and evidence-based approaches. Additionally, these programs operate with a focus on working with students in the context of their family, community, and in collaboration with other system partners.

This interdisciplinary collaboration brings innovative and holistic services to address the evolving needs of Vermont's children and their families. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the past three years over 5,252 unique kids were supported through this program by agency staff in schools with nearly half a million services provided through over 1.155 million hours of service. Core benefits include:

- **Affordability and value:** Contracting with the DAs brings mental health professionals into schools at lower costs than using private providers or school employees. These professionals come with the additional resources and expertise of their agency which facilitates access for each family to community-based resources, care coordination, administrative support for billing and reporting, connection to other DAs, and oversight and accountability to the State.
- **Clinical supervision and professional development:** Utilizing SB6 programs enables schools to bring DA mental health expertise to school-based teams with the additional benefit of built-in clinical supervision helping support students and ensure best practice while paving a pathway to advanced licensure.
- **Education:** Through numerous funding sources, agency clinicians provide consultation, training, and education to school students, staff, and families to help them better understand and work through mental health challenges.

While this collaborative approach is essential to the wellbeing of students and families, there are challenges. Current workforce challenges and low compensation means that agencies struggle to fill the number of positions required to ensure support in schools. DAs are competing in the health care sector for workforce and with other sectors that can pay more and do not present the same challenges, risks, and burnout. In a job market where mental health professionals are already in short supply, this results in

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unfilled positions, leaving some children without the support they need and Medicaid dollars on the table.

When agency positions go unfilled, schools are forced to hire their own staff or contract with costly private providers. The financial burden is passed up to the State and schools lose the many benefits of partnering with DAs. While some schools are willing to pay DAs more, providing a raise only to school-based professionals results in inequity within the DAs. Wage gaps damage morale, cause salary compression, and further exacerbate staffing and recruitment challenges.

Predictable Medicaid rate increases that are tied to market rates and inflationary costs would allow for competitive salaries at the agencies, empowering jobseekers to consider working in our field and allowing for the retention of experienced veteran staff who are essential to continuity of care. Additionally, staff would be better able to keep up with the growing cost of living and affordable housing would be more attainable, enabling staff to live in the communities they serve while providing for their own families as well as their clients.

To address your questions specifically:

- Success Beyond Six does not preclude the use of additional mental health services in schools. Schools can contract with private providers to address specific needs, for example, serving children with private insurance.
- Low wages, alongside unpredictable and uncertain increases each year that consistently lag behind CPI, are at the root of our workforce crisis.
- The challenges are at the systems-level; solutions need to be equally comprehensive. This calls for collaboration between DMH, AOE, schools, and agencies to level set their understanding of the funding mechanisms; gain clarity on the nature of the current needs of our children and how those needs are evolving; and ensure a statewide-wide partnership pursuing the shared goal of wellness for children, youth, and families.

Vermont Care Partners and our network agencies are committed to this partnership. We would be more than happy to speak further about any of the above or to address any additional comments or questions you may have. Thank you again for your time and the important work you are doing for our communities.

Sincerely,

Vermont Care Partners