

THE J. WARREN & LOIS MCCLURE FOUNDATION

To: Senate Education Committee
From: Carolyn Weir, Executive Director
Date: April 12, 2024

Considerations relating to H.874 and the proposed reduction in the line item that funds the authorization for Early College

Hello and thank you for inviting my testimony today, Chair Campion and members of the Committee. For the record, I'm Carolyn Weir, executive director of the McClure Foundation, a 30-year affiliate of the Vermont Community Foundation that works to close opportunity gaps in Vermont by making postsecondary education the easy choice, especially for young Vermonters. We do that through grantmaking and public-private partnerships.

At the McClure Foundation, we've long funded good ideas when we believe they have potential to close opportunity gaps and generate insights for public policymakers. The projects and ideas we've helped design, test, and scale have informed public funding in several instances, including federal funding for incarcerated education and state funding for the critical occupations framework and pandemic-era free college courses. That track record has turned us into something of a policy shop in recent years.

I'm here today to share concerns about the section of the Misc. Ed. Bill (H.874) and section 504.1 of the budget that proposes funding community schools by taking \$1M out of the line item that funds the authorization for Early College. To be clear, we don't oppose the community schools model or the insights that effort has generated through its ESSR-funded pilot years. But like VT Agency of Education Interim Secretary Heather Bouchey and CCV President Joyce Judy, **we recommend against scaling back state funding for the authorization for Early College at a time when that program is making significant strides in reaching students furthest from opportunity, especially through CCV.**

At the McClure Foundation, we're building on the success of the state's Early College program at CCV because after fifteen years of doing this work, we believe it's among the best levers to close opportunity gaps and create pathways to accelerated, free degrees.

That's why we promised students in the Vermont high school classes of 2023-2026 who complete the state's Early College program at CCV a second year of free college along with living stipends and enhanced advising. The Free Degree Promise through Early College is a fast-tracked pathway to a debt-free degree that creates a lifetime of opportunity. We partnered with CCV because it's where the majority of students enroll and because it's an engine of economic mobility. Strada came out with [national research](#) last week that says associate degree graduates in Vermont are the most likely in the country to achieve a positive ROI.

We're now two years into the Free Degree Promise through Early College and [can report that it's working](#) to make college the easy choice for many. 235 high school seniors from over 90% of VT's high schools enrolled in Early College at CCV this fall knowing they are eligible for a free degree. That marks a 70% increase in Early College enrollment at CCV since the Free Degree Promise was announced two years ago.

We're thrilled to see double the number of first-generation college students as well as higher participation among low-income students and students of color; those demographic groups are better represented in CCV's Early College cohort than among their peers in the general student population.

That's important because our north-star goals, and the north-star goals of Act 77, are to improve postsecondary readiness and increase postsecondary continuation – especially among the students who stand to benefit the most from a credential and who historically have not been supported to choose college and career training after high school.

CCV is seeing a 30% increase in Early College completers continuing their near-fulltime enrollment. We hope that means more young people choosing to stay in Vermont and more young people with a degree that will open doors and create life-long opportunities.

The fact that Early College is universally available creates its appeal to low-income students. [In a state with lots of narrowly scoped scholarships, only easily understood, debt-free pathways available to everybody have the power to transform youth and family perception that college is within reach.](#)

Early College and the Free Degree Promise help young people imagine a future they can create for themselves. I've spoken to many current and prospective students, and I think it's working because young people are ready for this opportunity and because CCV is ready to serve them.

Donovan Arnold is blending full-time college courses toward his accounting degree with paid work at Richford's only grocery store. As part of his "professional field experience" class at CCV, he's also completing a 100-hr internship with the accounting team at the nonprofit organization that runs the grocery store where he works. He will graduate from Richford Jr./Sr. HS with a bookkeeping certificate and 30 credits toward his CCV degree in accounting. He told me: *"The thing I'm most excited about is being able to get into what I want to do at a young age. With an associate degree, I could get a great accounting job at the age of 19. That feels like a really big win for me."*

Yesterday, I spoke with Lucas Messias de Matos, who immigrated with his family from South America in 2020 when he was in 9th grade. He was told about Early College by his ELL teacher at Essex High School and is currently enrolled in Early College at CCV. He is planning to continue in the Free Degree Promise to pursue his degree in behavioral sciences. When asked him if he'd encourage other students to enroll in Early College, he said, *"I would tell people: Your older self is going to be so proud of your younger self for doing this. Everyone has a future version of themselves, and Early College lets you create it."*

Based on this early success, we've been invited to join a Gates Foundation-supported national movement and community called Accelerate ED that is working to scale and sustain pathways to debt-free associate degrees for high school students across the country. Four states and four regional teams have been invited into the community this year and provided supports to draft a roadmap toward equitable scale, informed by empathy interviews with current and prospective students. We are looking forward to sharing what we learn through this process.

I urge Senate Education and Senate Appropriation Committees to consider the implications of a scenario in which the line item that funds the authorization for Early College is less than the actual cost. Will CCV, VTSU, and the participating colleges need to trust (and wait) on the Budget Adjustment Act to be reimbursed? Will they need to turn students away? Students are enrolling *now* and need to be able to count on this program being available to them as it has for their older siblings and peers.

With meaningful strides being made in the state's Early College program reaching those who need it most as they approach high school graduation, we think this is the year to be recommitting to Early College, not scaling back. Thank you.