

Thank you for inviting me today, Senator Champion, and Senate Ed Committee. My name is Meaghan Morgan-Puglisi, I am a National Board Certified Teacher, I train educators in Restorative Practices, I serve as Local Union President, and I have taught high school math at Mount Anthony Union High School for 11 years. As you know, Bennington is one of the most economically depressed areas of our state. We have many students experiencing extreme trauma daily as a result of the Opioid Epidemic, poverty, loss, and other situations. Some of our Elementary Schools are in severe crisis. On a daily basis, staff are hit, kicked, and assaulted. They have to evacuate their rooms to keep other students safe, and resupply materials any time a student destroys property. We have had over 60 injuries at one school alone and we are only at the half-way point of the year. While the schools try to implement Restorative and other interventions, they lack both the staff and the time since they are constantly putting out fires. Our district has created a separate location for some of these students experiencing severe trauma for short periods of time, but it is not currently staffed by any clinical personnel. Our school-based clinicians in each building are at capacity. The district was headed this way long before COVID. Covid just delayed the crisis point for two years.

Teachers and support staff have quit mid-year because of these conditions, and we started the year with fewer Educational Support Professionals than we need. Our ESPs are not paid a livable wage and have been fighting to get salaries increased. Over 55% do not take the district-offered insurance because they simply cannot afford it. We have no subs. They will not raise the sub pay because it would cause them to be paid more than our ESPs. Our school boards remain reluctant to increase school budgets because residents cannot afford our rising property taxes.

Here's what we need: 1) we need more funding for clinician and wrap-around services. Our district has so many homeless students that we need the voucher program for hotels to continue. We need more community schools where students can access doctors, dentist, and other services and families can access job and parenting support. We need the state to provide the funding for those resources. 2) We need higher wages. Teacher salaries in our district, one of the largest districts in the state, remain lower than most other districts. We lose staff every year to surrounding districts and states. It is incredibly difficult to attract new teachers and retain the ones we have. We need more staff so we can provide the supports our students need. 3) We need things taken off our plates. The high school needs to not worry about Proficiency-Based grading and graduation requirements. We are keeping dual gradebooks because colleges outside Vermont have made it clear that a Proficiency-Based transcript puts our students at a disadvantage. In addition, the new Special Ed requirements are not specific enough to provide districts with guidance on how to implement them. Different districts are doing different things, and our district has interpreted them to mean that all special education students need to be completely mainstreamed. We have students thrust into the general education setting without the supports they need, without the Special Education staff necessary. I have a class of 18 students where only one is not on an IEP or 504. Even with a math teacher, special educator, and para educator in the room, we do not have enough

support. And 4) perhaps most importantly, we need the state to rethink how it funds education. Tying funding so closely to property taxes sets educators and schools against residents. They blame us for property taxes going up. School boards won't raise our salaries to the levels necessary to make our district desirable because they don't want to antagonize voters. Money is part of the reason why our district will not admit that we don't have the resources to serve some of our students. If we did, we would have to pay tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars to send them somewhere else. We simply don't have the money.

I teach because I love my students and my colleagues. We conducted a listening campaign at the beginning of the school year and found that, overwhelmingly, our staff return every day because of our students and colleagues. But conditions are making it harder and harder to keep going. Self-care is not enough. We need structural change. Covid gave us the opportunity to reconsider how we do school, but we missed the chance. I think our state is brave enough to re-think education all together. We just need to do it. Thank you so much for your attention today.