

FY 2026 Budget_Michelle Faust

Testimony by Michelle Faust

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Hello, I am Michelle Faust, resident of Irasburg, Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Learning Services and proud member of the Adult Education and Literacy Network in Vermont. I am here to advocate for the State to adhere to the amendments to 16 V.S.A. (§945 and §4011) made during the 2024 legislative session to ensure full funding of the Adult Education and Secondary Credential Program that governs state Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) services

Currently, based on what we have seen of the Governor's proposed FY26 budget and based on communications with the AOE, it appears that the total number of AEL students (2003) used to inform the FY 25 Budget Adjustment Act are not being used to calculate the total appropriation for FY26. Based on the statute, the calculation for the Adult Diploma Program (as listed in the FY 26 budget (General Funds and Ed Funds) should be calculated as follows:

FY 26 Base Education rate of \$12,668.00 (as reported to us by Robin Castle, AOE) x 26% = \$3,293.68 x 2003 students (average of prior 2 years, FY 23 and FY 24) = \$6,597,241.04

Why does this matter so much? Let me be clear: the impact of predictable funding for AEL cannot be overstated. In the previous legislative session, we were fortunate enough to receive approval for a funding formula that promised stability and predictability for AEL services. This funding has allowed our organization to do critical work:

1. **Attract and Retain Qualified Staff:** With stable funding, we have been able to hire and retain qualified educators who are essential to the success of our programs. We are no longer faced with the constant turnover that was once so prevalent in the field.
2. **Restore Benefits:** We were able to bring back health insurance for our staff, which is a vital benefit that supports staff retention and wellbeing. This benefit also helps us stay competitive in a field where finding qualified educators can be challenging.
3. **Invest in High-Quality Instruction:** Predictable funding has given us the resources necessary to offer high-quality instruction to our students. Our instructors are better supported, and we are able to develop and implement new initiatives that respond to the needs of Vermont's workforce, ensuring that our students gain the skills they need to succeed in the changing job market.
4. **Workforce Development Initiatives:** With this stable funding, we have been able to create and launch new workforce development programs that not only benefit our students but also contribute to the overall health of Vermont's economy. The return on

this investment is already evident in our improved performance measures, which reflect the tangible benefits of a well-supported educational system.

The predictable funding model that was approved last year has been a game-changer, not just for our organization, but for AEL programs across Vermont. It has allowed us to plan for the future with confidence, knowing that we can continue to provide high-quality services and adapt to the needs of our students and communities.

We are asking you to honor the changes made to AEL funding in the previous legislative session and ensure that AEL programs are fully funded in FY26. This funding is not just a budgetary line item—it is a direct investment in the future of Vermont's workforce and the success of our adult learners.

This is not just about sustaining services; it's about continuing the vital work of building a stronger, more resilient workforce for Vermont.

Thank you for your time and consideration.