

Testimony to the Senate and House Joint Education Committee

Jacoby Soter, 11th Grade Student, Bellows Free Academy, St. Albans, Vermont

Greetings,

My name is Jacoby Soter, and I am an 11th-grade student at Bellows Free Academy in St. Albans, Vermont.

As a student, I deeply value the strong sense of community within Vermont's public schools. Vermont is among the states with the highest per-pupil spending in education, which reflects a core value held by Vermonters: that public education is a top priority. What truly makes our schools special are the people—students, educators, families, and the broader community.

Vermont schools offer students opportunities to meet challenges and grow into the world beyond the classroom. Many of our schools benefit from essential partnerships with community organizations, which provide internships, job shadows, substance use prevention programs, and other real-world learning experiences. These partnerships are a critical part of preparing students for life after high school. Future education policy must recognize and support the role of these community partners in helping students gain confidence and skills for the future.

There is also a strong sense of pride and unity within our schools. Students and community members come together to celebrate and support one another at sporting events, concerts, drama performances, and award ceremonies. It's important that we do not separate "students" and "community members." And that we recognize that we are one community, and we succeed when we show up for one another—in both the traditional forms and in the new, reimagined ones. This value of shared community must be reflected in future education policy.

One final—and essential—aspect of community is the authentic engagement of young people. Vermont is at a crossroads in how we approach education, and we have a unique opportunity to include young people—not just as tokenized participants, but as co-creators of the future of Vermont schools. Students must be seen as real agents of change.

As a student school board member, I've seen firsthand the invaluable insight that young people bring to shaping school policy. Because we are directly impacted by these decisions, our perspectives are not only relevant—they're essential. When students co-design policies alongside district leaders, implementation becomes more effective and meaningful. That's why I strongly urge future education policy to require all Vermont school boards to go beyond tokenized engagement of young people and include students as valued and voting members.

My vision for Vermont's education system—and for public education more broadly—is this:

- Every student has at least one trusted adult in the building they can speak to authentically.

- Social-emotional learning and restorative practices are not treated as “extras,” but are fully integrated into curricula.
- Students feel physically and emotionally safe in their school environment.
- Universal meals are available to all students, so they can fully participate in learning.
- Students have real, ongoing opportunities to share their voices with principals, administrators, and district leaders—and those leaders actively make decisions with student perspectives at the top of mind, which means district leadership is visible and accessible to students, not distant figures behind office doors
- Lastly, all students are taught a civically responsive education, and that students are both encouraged and inspired to register to vote and engage meaningfully with their communities.

This vision for Vermont doesn't have to remain a dream—it can be our reality. We are at a pivotal moment. And by meaningfully engaging us—students—in shaping the future of education, we can build a system that reflects our values and prepares all of us for life beyond high school.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I appreciate your time and attention.