

Good Morning, My name is Isa Harrington, and my name is Libby Gabel and we are juniors at South Burlington High School. We want to thank you for taking the time to listen to our testimony today. We were part of the group of students who were involved in the writing of this bill over the summer and we think now more than ever in Vermont we need to be empowering our students given all of the decisions being made around education in our state. We are here testifying today in support of H640 because as students who have almost finished their time in the south Burlington school district we have seen time and time again what students can do when given the opportunity and the platform. We are not school board reps but I sit on my school's student council and we are an involved member of the South Burlington community. We have not had the opportunity to vote and engage that way with democracy but over the past few years as we have become more and more aware of what is going on in the community. One thing we always find ourselves hearing about is what is happening within the schools, and with good reason.

We need to keep in mind that the students who are in school now are the next generation of Americans. Students in my class will be voting in the midterms. Seniors at my high school can vote on our new budget in March. It is a disservice to them and to our communities to not be looking to them as capable members of society for guidance around what the priorities need to be for education. They are the ones experiencing the everyday effects that the decisions around education create and no one knows better what the student body needs than those who are a part of it. No matter how hard teachers and administrators try there are always going to be discrepancies between what they perceive and what the students perceive and a large part of why is because they don't give their students enough credit when it comes to hearing their experience. Again no one better understands what the priorities of the student are than the students themselves. It is so incredibly hard to create policy that at its core needs to be for them when you don't understand what they truly need. For several years at this point SB has had trouble passing its budget, and students are not unaware of this or what it means. But when it comes to what is being cut, their voices are left out of the conversation almost completely. We know that there are platforms in place such as student councils and leadership clubs that exist in some form in most every school in Vermont and beyond, but the truth behind them is that they provide next to no support for students wanting to create meaningful change. Within my school districts groups such as our student council are treated in large part as glorified party planning committees in many instances and for that reason are often not taken seriously. For several years now, actions that the student council aims to take are quickly shot down by our administrators without real dialogue between the two groups. These student groups are at their core an illusion of power.

For this reason there is also a lack of trust that exists between students and adults when it comes to what it means to have the power to create change because of the somewhat unfair perception of students that their opinions can only have so much weight because they don't have a degree or enough lived experience. But when it comes to school environment, and communities, priorities, and decisions being made that affect you, you don't need a degree to tell you what is important, you need your own experience, you need to have lived it. We want students to have a stake in their own education, and a desire and a platform to speak up. This can only improve what they take away from their education experience as a whole. Within every

community there are students who are capable and passionate and determined enough to take on a responsibility like this of representing the interest of the larger body at the decision making table but there are also too many students that they don't think that they can do something meaningful enough, they don't think they could write a bill, they don't think they could go before the school board and talk about an issue and its because they don't know how, they are not given the opportunity to try or to learn how to engage in this way. At times I have been frustrated that my voice doesn't hold the same weight as many adults in the room. Ultimately it comes down to what we have seen time and time again which is that students have no real power to create meaningful change while the adults in the room have the power to treat their voices as secondary opinions that can be ignored, whether they use it or not.

H640 would give students real, concrete power and allow them to engage with both other students and adults. Ultimately the goal of H640 is to demonstrate the commitment to giving young people a seat at the table, to involve them in the democratic process, and to teach them how to use their voice. There is strength and power in the voice of students. We have witnessed it for ourselves when a large portion of our student population stood up to our admin last year to protect a beloved class that was on the chopping block. You can see it in the writing of this bill which was facilitated entirely by high school students around Vermont. Young people have a desire to be heard, we are the ones inheriting this society and this state in the future, it's ours too. We are grateful to everyone who works tirelessly to improve our education system and to those who advocate on behalf of students. We hope that with H640 we can create a meaningful partnership between students and adults that makes student engagement a priority moving forward. We thank you for your time today.