

Hi, my name is Mayla Landis-Marinello. I live in Middlesex and I am currently a senior at U-32 High School. I am also a member of the Vermont State Youth Council on the Education Committee. Thank you for taking the time to listen to this testimony today. I am passionate about incorporating the youth voice into important decisions being made about our public education system. I am here to express my support for H640, an act that would require voting student members on school district boards.

I am a representative of the Vermont Students for School Board Representation advocacy group. This summer, I attended the Governor's Institute for Global Issues and Youth Action, where I took an Educational Policy class and had the opportunity to learn about Vermont's education system, particularly the current proposed changes of Act. 73. With the Governor's Institute, I visited the State House and participated in a mock education committee session, co-facilitated by Representative Harple and Representative Quimby, where I advocated with my peers for the importance of including youth voice in current discussions around education. In our mock committee, we drafted the first version of the bill H640. Afterwards, our group of young people followed up with Representative Harple and she graciously brought the bill proposal to legislative counsel. I am very excited to join you here today and express my support for H640.

Since I was in elementary school, I have engaged in democracy, taking the time to educate myself about the issues I care about, attending climate rallies, and participating in activism clubs at my school. I am 17 years old, and not yet old enough to vote, and yet I have been taking action to stand up for the causes I believe in for years. As a young person, I have often felt frustrated because it is hard to advocate for the issues I am passionate about when I cannot yet vote. Specifically regarding education, lawmakers are currently making many important decisions that will decide the future of our state's young people. I strongly believe in the importance of uplifting our voices and experiences as youth, which should inform your decisions about the future of our education system. H640 recognizes this and takes concrete action to incorporate youth voice into our systems of decision-making regarding education, by ensuring voting student representatives on school boards.

H640 requires *voting* student representatives on a district school board from each grade of high school, as well as nonvoting members in grades seven and eight. This requirement was designed intentionally to introduce students to the school board process in middle school, where they can contribute and engage, and earn a vote in high school. The ability to vote as a high school student representative on the district board is the most important part of H640, because it does not tokenize student voice, but truly values what we have to say as young people.

I have been told by many adults that they want to hear young people's voices. I have spoken at public comment during my school board meetings to advocate for protecting library and arts funding, met with my school principal to advocate for access to independent learning opportunities, and met with legislators as a member of the Vermont Youth Lobby. Every time, I am thanked for sharing my opinion as a young person. But often it can feel like my opinion doesn't hold much weight, since as a young person I do not have the opportunities that adults have to vote and directly engage in democracy. H640 would not only involve youth in the democratic process of voting, but would make a clear commitment to the importance of youth voice in these decisions. I am grateful to all of the legislators, school board members, administrators, and community members who put in the work every day to develop a plan for the future of Vermont's education system. **But the ones who will be affected most directly by these decisions are the students.** It is crucial that students are given a say in these decisions - and by giving us an opportunity to vote, you will be giving us a voice. H640 will provide a systemic pathway to youth engagement and participation in our school system and democracy, which is critical in order to ensure that Vermont youth are represented as we continue to tackle education reform as a state. Thank you.