

Sarah Kourkoulis Witness Testimony

My name is Sarah Kourkoulis. I am an undergraduate student who is graduating on Sunday with my degree in Secondary Education with Special Education from Vermont State University, and a degree in Social Studies.

I transferred to Northern Vermont University from CCV in the summer of 2023, right as the college was transitioning to Vermont State University. As part of their transition, my education major changed from Inclusive Adolescent Education to Secondary Education with Special Education. At the time, I was not aware of that, and it wasn't until I realized that I was getting a lot of special education classes that my advisor explained the change to me. Initially, I found it frustrating, as it altered my graduation schedule. However, I found those first special education classes incredibly enlightening, and I was also encouraged that the dual endorsement would enable me to increase my odds of employment after graduation.

I did not anticipate changing my career path, however. I planned on becoming a social studies high school teacher, right up until the fall semester of this year. That's when I was enrolled into a 240 hour practicum for special education. That semester has changed my pathway, as I found myself working in a way I was very familiar with.

Prior to my enrollment in college in 2022, I was a homeschool high school teacher for 20 years. In that role, I worked with 20 students who had a wide range of abilities, life experiences, and academic strengths and weaknesses. I had designed my own curriculum for English and history, and scoured the internet for methods on how to teach literacy and math skills to high school students.

As I worked in the special education classrooms and with kids inside general education classrooms, I found that my strengths as a teacher, working one-on-one with students and in small groups, really shone in that environment. I love working with these kids, building rapport and relationships, challenging them to be their best selves, and to actively do hard things.

This semester, I did student teaching with a fantastic history teacher at a local high school. That particular high school has a large percentage of students on IEPs, and the majority of his classes had a majority of students with IEPs or 504s. Having a background of education classes that focused on both general education, such as lesson planning, Universal Design for Learning, and classroom management, and special education, where we learned the laws around special education, the benefits and challenges of MTSS, and how to do IEPs, gave me a clearer understanding of the students in our classrooms.

I am going to graduate on Sunday at the Johnson campus, and I feel very strongly that teacher education programs should include special education endorsements, and that giving young teachers the experience and opportunities to learn about special education will do wonders to remove the stigma of special education from students, and tear down the barriers that still remain between kids who receive special education services and students who don't. Many general education teachers, at least from what I've seen, lack an understanding of the basics of special ed, how universal design for learning benefits all students and how to incorporate its principles into their lesson design, and what appropriate scaffolding looks like for students at different abilities. Additionally, it can be easy to look at students who are working with a para as someone else's responsibility. There is often little communication between the para and the classroom teacher, and often very little between the paras and other students in the classroom. Incorporating special education classes into teacher education programs, I believe, would help reduce this type of silo-ing of students.

A special education position opened up at the high school where I did both my special education practicum and my student teaching, and I applied, interviewed for the position, and was hired. There is a high need, I was often told, for special educators, and when I did my interview, I found out that I was the only applicant. In the last week, I heard that another special educator at this school will be leaving after this year, which means that they will be looking for someone to fill that position. Next school year, they will be having at least one brand new special educator, and perhaps another who has experience, perhaps not.

In looking forward, I can see a lot of area for growth in the school where I'll be working. I know that the special education department has been working to help Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports have more concrete lessons plans and strategies in order to keep students in the classroom as much as possible. I have helped with presentations and worked with some of these special educators who are endeavoring to turn the literacy tide, who refuse to accept the idea that "some students just won't know how to read" when they graduate.

I believe strongly that the purpose of a high school education is to equip students with the tools they need to live a good life: to be able to independently read a lease agreement, to know how to manage their own paychecks, and to appreciate beauty in the world. Of course, I want students to find jobs and careers that they will love, but I believe that the things that make our lives worth living are often the intangibles: it's the independence we feel when we are living on our own, buying our own food and paying our own bills; it's the joy we feel when we see the beauty around us, when we funnel that joy into art of any kind, whether it's carving, poetry, painting, or photography; it's the ability to read and write and

not feel inadequate when we do so. I want high school students of all abilities to feel those things, to know they are capable, and strong, and able to do hard things.