

Troy Riddell  
Committee Testimony  
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Hello, House Committee on Education

My Name Is Troy Riddell

My goal with this testimony is to share my experience as a student educator. Before beginning, I'd like to thank the Chair, Peter Conlon, Vice Chair, Beth Quimby, and the whole of the Committee on Education for this opportunity. I've been a 16-year student of Vermont public schools who has just ended their educational experience as a graduate from the University of Vermont with a degree in Secondary Education with a focus on History and Social Studies. I'm going to start by explaining my reasons for going into the field of education, what drove me to this field, and what kept me here. Then I'll detail my experience as a novice educator, what issues I find with the job market, and what challenges students are facing in the classroom.

For a lot of Vermont students, High School is a vital time of identity discovery. I was a sophomore and junior high school student through the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced the implementation of the proficiency-based grading system. I have been a student through both trump presidencies. Vermont has educational institutions with some of the kindest and most caring people I have ever experienced, and, even then, they sometimes struggled to provide direction for young students. I think, **for** a lot of educators, we have encountered a wall. The path that many generations experienced to give them their upward social class mobility through education no longer exists. For the average American living paycheck to paycheck, educational opportunities have been removed or closed at the behest of failing social welfare and the private sector's invasion into formerly public services. As someone who mentors high school students, I can anticipate that pathways for

students to have better standards of living are even more constrained. When I was a high school student, thinking about what I could provide my community under these closing economic and educational constraints, there was a set of constant truths that I internalized based on historical facts to guide my decisions regarding my place in the workforce.

Workers need homes, People need food, and Children need education. I made my decision to continue my learning in this field. I didn't arrive at this conclusion lightly. I saw how costly the education I would be receiving was. I saw my father's job as a paraeducator, and my mother's job as a food service worker in an elementary school. It gave me pause. I didn't know how much it would set me back, how much debt I would be stuck with. I heard horror stories from other adults about the grueling and cruel process of loan repayment. I was afraid that the decisions young people made in the past were to better themselves, was actually a vehicle for predatory loans and a life of debt repayment. I was afraid that the pathway that was formerly set in stone had been eroded and was impassable for students such as myself.

Programs like the VT Teacher Grant gave parts of that lost pathway back to students, who might not have otherwise survived the cruel reality of profit-centered education. I applied in 2024 and was awarded one year of paid college tuition through this program, saving my family around 16,000 dollars. Not only did this grant give me a greater reason to stay in Vermont, but it was a motivating factor for me to teach. I saw that grant as a promise from the state to me. I thought to myself, "I will pay this debt back to my state, I will educate my fellow Vermonters, and I will find my place in a state that needs me to care ."

That scholarship opportunity was a force that drove me to continue in the field of education.

When I look at the labor market now, I have deep concerns for fellow graduates in my generation. My cohort of learners and friends around me have struggled with finding employment. Consistently, my local community of friends and I have found temporary work in food service, tech support, retail, childcare, tutoring, paraeducating, substitute teaching, and counseling. The trend in these forms of work is clear. The new generation of workers, Gen-Z specifically, is stuck with jobs that focus on emotional labor. Not only are we expected to work in low-paying jobs, but we are also expected to be able to produce constant levels of empathy and compassion for the people we interact with. This is an unsustainable labor demand leading to higher levels of burnout, stress, mental health issues, and prolonged unemployment. How we, as the state of Vermont, resolve this issue is by prioritizing financial stability. The current cost of living in Vermont is not sustainable. The housing crisis that we are experiencing post-COVID is not just trapped in the college town of Burlington. It spreads to the rest of the state. It's hard as someone entering the workforce to look at raising costs of college, housing, goods, and services, and choose to be a teacher. Education should not be a career for only the selfless and sacrificial. Everyone should feel compelled to become an educator.

When I entered my student teaching program, I finally got to experience what the more realized practice of education was. Not just the management of the classroom, but the management of a community. A community of diverse educators and students, each interconnected with the outcome of producing empathetic citizens, learners, and workers. When I was in my student teaching, I felt that community. My work as a student teacher was valuable not just to me, but also to my fellow educators and students. I think these programs are vital systems that must be supported to benefit future educators. The

connections made in these environments matter, for staff, for students, and for communities.

As this may be the only time I address this committee and speak in such proximity to legislative power, I additionally want to address issues that I believe are impacting the outcomes of students in our school classrooms.

First, students' lives are more digital than ever. Students perceive, create, and engage with complex digital spaces developed by private equity, and we as educators are sidelined in that conversation. We are highly trained, educated voices on students' brain and behavioral development, removed from providing input on how students' engagement with these digital spaces is inherently harmful. I believe that schools need to be given the ability to regulate their digital environments just as much as their physical classrooms. Students' digital lives are also inherently global, which presents additional challenges. What students see around the world, in the media, affects them greatly. Our actions as the state of Vermont and the country of the United States get internalized by these students and shape how they perceive the worth of their education. Students become desensitized or feel helpless to change the many wars and abuses they are shown. I believe it makes potential educators less willing to involve themselves in these classroom environments if they feel that students are hopeless or detached from their learning.

The second challenge in the classroom is students' access to generative A.I. services. When I am asked by non-educators about my work, they often ask how I and the whole of Vermont educators are addressing this issue. These tools track student data, they are trained on the information provided to them by students, and they often plagiarize and take from false sources. In my opinion, there should be no home in our schools and public institutions for these services. Generative A.I. tools take away student autonomy and

thinking in the classroom, as well as, in some very tragic cases, drive students to harm themselves and others. Plainly stated, I believe that ChatGPT and its ilk are dangerous to our students and shouldn't be in our schools. I believe that as a state, we need to be unflinching on this; we have the data and the studies that justify this position against A.I. in the classroom. I believe we need to be able to draw the line to protect our students and our staff from these invasions of privacy and promote actions against the adoption of A.I. into the classroom.

The third is a lack of direction for our younger men and boys. Young men and boys are a difficult subject to inherently approach because of the many different influences they are exposed to during their cognitive development. But the overwhelming cultural trend has been to expose young men to harmful stereotypes. Digital content creators promoting bigoted, sexist, racist, and homophobic ideas have been allowed to warp the minds of our young men and boys. We as educators and as a state have a direct imperative to stop students from harming themselves, that is, psychologically, physically, financially, and mentally. As a young man who grew up exposed to these influences, I was only able to break out of these harmful ideas through a caring and motivated community. Our schools should be those spaces to rectify these harms, change how students engage with these influences, adapt how they think about themselves and others, and promote radical empathy.

I arrive now at the end of my testimony here. I leave here hoping there is a place for me, even with my stalwart motivation; the market is tight for novice educators. Perhaps in a few years, there will be a different story. If I had one final message for this committee, it would be to act proactively rather than reactively. We cannot be at the whims of forces seeking to attack education. Whether that be dealing with sabotaging federal bodies or

profit-seeking tech infestations, we need to be proactive in dealing with these forces. This committee has a vital part of Vermont's educational future in its hands, more substantially than I do as one citizen. I urge you to continue listening to educators and ask how schools are managing these crises. I hope that there can be many more educators after me, who find their place through Vermont schools and choose to remain in Vermont. To secure this outcome, we need to prioritize our schools, our communities, and our students first.

I once again thank this committee for hearing my testimony, and I am willing to answer additional questions.