

# Kindle Farm School (HCRS Division)

## Testimony in Support of Vermont Therapeutic Schools — and the Unique Value of DA-Embedded Programs

Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Drew Gradinger, and I serve at Kindle Farm School, a therapeutic school operated as part of a Designated Agency in Vermont.

I am here today to speak in support of all therapeutic schools in Vermont, because they are not an optional service — they are an essential part of the state’s continuum of education and behavioral health supports.

### **Therapeutic schools serve the students Vermont cannot afford to lose.**

Across the state, therapeutic schools educate students who have experienced significant trauma, emotional disturbance, and complex behavioral and mental health needs. These are students who often cannot safely access learning in traditional settings — not because they don’t want to learn, but because they have not yet had the supports needed to regulate, trust adults, and stay engaged.

Therapeutic schools keep students learning, connected, and moving forward.

### **Therapeutic schools are built on accountability — not punishment.**

A key reason I value therapeutic education is that it is designed around **accountability instead of punishment**.

In therapeutic schools:

- We reduce power struggles and “power over” approaches.
- We prioritize emotionally and physically safe environments.
- Suspensions are rare and used only in extreme safety situations.
- Students learn the skills they need to succeed: regulation, communication, problem-solving, and repair.

This is what real behavior change looks like — not exclusion, not cycles of crisis, and not repeated failure.

## **Therapeutic schools work because the adult team is aligned.**

One of the most powerful things therapeutic schools offer is **alignment**:

Direct service teachers and para-professionals, clinicians, supervisors, and administrators all operate from shared frameworks, shared expectations, and shared goals.

This alignment allows the entire team to focus on one thing:

**supporting students through consistency, safety, and skill-building — not escalation.**

## **Designated Agency–embedded therapeutic schools bring something unique and irreplaceable.**

While all therapeutic schools provide essential services, I want to draw attention to a subset of programs in Vermont that bring **additional statewide value**:

### **Therapeutic schools that are embedded within Vermont’s Designated Agencies — including the Vermont Care Partners network.**

These programs are uniquely equipped because they are not standalone schools. They are connected to Vermont’s broader behavioral health system.

That means we can offer:

- **Integrated clinical staff**, embedded in the daily school environment
- **Crisis services**, including the ability to respond quickly and appropriately
- **Care coordination** that extends beyond the classroom
- **Family engagement** that is supported by agency-level infrastructure
- The ability to coordinate and support **state-level CSP planning** and interagency collaboration
- Strong continuity between school-based services and community-based treatment systems

In short:

Designated Agency therapeutic schools provide the depth of care Vermont needs for its most complex learners — without requiring Vermont to create a whole new system.

## **Vermont must protect the continuum — not collapse it.**

Right now, Vermont is discussing major education reform, cost containment, and restructuring of special education delivery.

But Vermont’s own system data shows something important:

- Vermont is highly inclusive for most students,

- Yet still relies heavily on therapeutic and out-of-district placements for a small, high-need population.

This is not a contradiction. It is a sign of a **service gap** — a missing “middle layer” of supports.

If Vermont moves too quickly to reduce therapeutic placements without building that middle layer first, the likely outcome is:

- more student crises
- more hospital-level intervention
- more staff burnout
- and ultimately higher costs — not lower costs

### **My request today is simple.**

As you make decisions about reform, funding, and system redesign, I urge you to:

1. **Protect Vermont’s full continuum of services** for students with complex emotional and behavioral needs.
2. **Preserve and strengthen therapeutic schools**, including those operated through Designated Agencies.
3. **Build the missing middle layer**, using partnerships between districts and therapeutic providers — not by dismantling what currently works.
4. Ensure that **therapeutic schools and Designated Agencies have a formal seat at the table** in policy and implementation discussions.

### **Closing**

Therapeutic schools are one of the most humane, accountable, and effective tools Vermont has for supporting students with the greatest needs.

And therapeutic schools embedded within Designated Agencies are especially equipped — because we bring the clinical infrastructure, crisis response capacity, and system-level coordination that public schools cannot realistically replicate.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to Vermont’s students, families, and educators.