

Good afternoon,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here for the House Education Committee. My name is Ian Trombulak. I was born and raised here in Vermont – I graduated from Middlebury Union High School and Middlebury College, and earned my Master’s Degree from UVM in 2017. Since then, I have spent the last 9 years working as a high school counselor at Lamoille Union High School in Hyde Park, Vermont. I am currently on the Board of Directors for the VT School Counselor Association, which helps advocate for counselors across our state. I believe I carry with me a unique and valuable perspective on the mental health of Vermont adolescents, and those who work to support their healthy development.

I did not like growing up in Vermont. It was stifling and I was often bored. I wanted to leave the state for college, but a variety of forces conspired to keep me here; and thank god they did. As a young adult I started to fall in love with the place, and I have never left since. My adult life has become about supporting the next generation of Vermonters, their identity development, and their search for their place in the world.

Today’s kids are growing up in a different Vermont, and a different world, than I did. “Boredom” is a thing of the past – the proliferation of cell phones and social media has made sure that no moment in time is too short to fill with some form of digital stimulus. The social pressures of school follow students to their homes, their practices, their jobs – anywhere they can bring a phone, so too can they bring a deluge of stress and anxiety. And while this technology helped them all stay connected during the pandemic, they emerged from that crisis even more tethered to their devices than ever. The ease of connection has come with a darkside – this is a generation of teenagers who never truly get to be alone.

As a school counselor to nearly 200 students between 14 and 18, I bear witness to this. I see my students not only carrying more stress, but also being equipped with fewer tools to manage it. The rise in anxiety, too, has come hand-in-hand with diminished resilience to life’s ups and downs. Our teenagers are as funny, brilliant, creative, and unique as ever – but they are suffering. And they need our help.

I applaud the Vermont Legislature for its move to ban cell phones from school buildings across the state. I can tell you today in no uncertain terms that it has been a game changer at my school. The concerns I have spoken about persist, because Rome is not unbuilt in a day. But the change has been stark, and the results have been dramatic. It is the most engaged and, as the kids would say, “locked in” that our school has been since before the pandemic.

However the work to support our schools and our students must continue. As committees debate the future of Vermont schools and the ground shifts under our feet, educators show up to work every day and do our best to provide as much consistency and routine as possible for the developing minds placed in our care. We do this amidst budget cuts, reductions in force, and the constant thrumming drum beat of “do more with less”.

When we ask schools to do more with less, we must understand the ways in which our students bear the brunt of that. Not only do they lose access to unique and robust learning opportunities, they also lose access to quality and comprehensive social/emotional supports. Not just school counselors, but also school social workers, clinicians, behavioral specialists, and more. These positions are instrumental for the healthy functioning of a school building, as they support students beyond the academic domain and help them develop skills to navigate their life at a time when emotions are the most confusing.

The ripple effect of budget squeezes is tremendous. When elementary schools reduce their support positions, students reach middle and high school with an underdeveloped sense of self and emotional vocabulary. When students struggle to process their emotions, they aren't able to focus on academic development. When we aren't focused on academic development at schools, we must ask ourselves – what are we doing here?

I give this testimony fully aware that we stand on uncertain ground when it comes to the future of education in Vermont. Educators across the state are waiting to find out if our Governor and our Secretary of Education truly have our best interests at heart, or if their plans for Vermont schools will lead to further erosion of supports available to Vermont students. While we stand on that uncertain ground, I am here to ask the House Education Committee to stand with schools, and stand with those of us offering critical supports to our most vulnerable students.

Thank you so much for your time and your consideration.