

My testimony (clocked at 3 min, 45 seconds):

Chair Conlon and Members of the Committee:

It's my pleasure to be with you today to speak on the vital importance independent schools play for many Vermont students, especially in remote locations such as the NEK. While I know that this topic can be controversial and raise passionate ideas from people, today I have the advantage of not being a politician, but a career educator. That allows me to speak about what I see as helping students separate from the many policy choices you have to consider. If you'd like, I'd be happy to come back another time to chat about those as well.

In parts of the NEK the independent high schools serve as the only venue for local students. While there are some public high schools, topography, transportation, and geography make some of them inaccessible to many families. At Lyndon Institute we serve almost 400 students from 24 different sending towns, and while we do have a small boarding program of two dozen students from 13 countries, 95% of our students are local. I hear people talk about independent schools like ivory towers of elitism. Our most recent data from AoE shows that 56% of Lyndon Institute students qualify for Free or Reduced meals, 25% are on active IEPs, and almost 40% are on some sort of learning plan. Each year about half of LI graduates go onto some sort of continuing education and half move into careers, many through our CTE program, the only program in the region.

My background is in literature, and that discipline reaches back thousands of years. Education, however, has been treated as an academic discipline for less than 100 years, and with emerging research on brain science, pedagogy, and technology, our understanding of teaching and learning seems to evolve almost daily. And yet though all of that work and changing themes, one that seems to endure is that all students do not learn the same way. One approach does not reach every student successfully. Now I am a product of public schooling, having attended public K-12 schools and both public and independent colleges. I have worked in both public and independent schools during my almost three decades-long career. I have great respect for any school that lifts up a student. And I know, I know, that not every school works well for every student. That is why independent schools exist: because parents see that their children sometimes need a different approach. Independent schools are not all the same: some focus on experiential education, some on special education, some on project-based learning, outdoor learning, therapeutic support, college prep, career pathways, and so on. We are designed to be laboratories for pedagogy and have more freedom than traditional public schools to explore differing educational practices. If I had my way, independent and public schools would exist in a robust partnership where success strategies are shared and both made better able to lift up students because of the sharing. If it is possible to put aside politics and political platforms, our faculty and staff know that it is the same blood, same mud, and every student deserves a pathway to success regardless of where they attend school. Do not hate us, do not fear us...instead partner with us. We all believe that these childrens' futures are the most important thing we fight for, and now, more than ever, it feels like a fight. Kids today face so many challenges and have to strive harder than before to find their paths towards happiness

and success in life. As educators and legislators we need to be allies now. And so I extend my personal invitation to each and every one of you to come to visit our schools in the NEK and see who we actually are, whom we serve, and how we need one another to help these amazing children to find their own pathways through life.