

Testimony

(2/25/26 - to House and Senate Education Committees, questions from Senate Ed)

My name is Helen Sullivan, and I teach social studies at Montpelier High School. Thank you for your time this afternoon.

This is my 18th year of teaching. I usually teach more 9th graders than anyone else, and they are so much fun, but the highlight of my year every year is my junior/senior elective class on current events: Media Studies and Contemporary Issues. I think every high school teacher loves electives; they are often our passion projects, and the students who enroll in them share those interests. For me that means a group of students who care deeply about what is happening in the world around them and who show up ready to talk and (just as importantly) ready to listen.

- This past fall that meant conversations about vaccine recommendations and the civil war in Sudan, about the shootings of Charlie Kirk and Renee Nicole Good, even about education reform in Vermont, and on one great day about conservation and a baby black rhino.
- And that's just what we do in the first 15-20 minutes of class.
- The rest of our time is structured around in-depth projects focused on the skills of research, collaboration, and effective communication. This fall students presented on the news media in China, the history of Fox News, and photojournalism in Palestine. They wrote policy papers on gun control in Montana, Connecticut, Texas, and Vermont. We debated whether Artificial Intelligence is a threat to humanity and then invited our district's curriculum director to join us for a conversation about AI in education. We examined US-Venezuela relations through a Model United Nations conference and ended the semester with final projects ranging from adult illiteracy to modern day slavery to Slovakian politics.
- It was such a good semester. And even when the news was terrible, which it often was, I looked forward to discussing it with my amazing students. All SEVEN of them.

Now Montpelier High School isn't big but it's also not tiny, and I know that there are a lot of great offerings competing for the attention of our juniors and seniors: other electives and AP classes (the passion projects of my wonderful colleagues), community based learning and personalized learning, a job, or just an extra free block. But this year 16 of our seniors are attending early college, and I worry about what happens to these students and the schools they leave behind when they decide to skip senior year.

This is why I'm asking you to repeal or at least make a plan to seriously reevaluate the Early College program.

- There is already enough pressure on kids to grow up fast.
- They miss out on their senior year in high school and the school community misses their leadership. We miss them in our advisories, our clubs, our Fall Harvest Celebration talent show, and (of course) our classes.

- Some students choose early college because they feel like there aren't enough classes they still want to take in high school, but this can easily become vicious cycle. As enrollment shrinks in AP classes and upper level electives, they can become less attractive or even be cancelled, and so more students consider leaving high school early.
- Some students choose early college as a financial decision, and on an individual basis that is hard to argue with. But students who take this path sometimes need to pay out of pocket for things like activities fees (this is over \$3000 for students attending Norwich University), and they must provide their own reliable transportation. The students benefitting financially from this program are often not those who need it the most. Two years ago only 12.5% of our early college students qualified for free/reduced lunch compared to 31.8% of the student body as a whole. The year before that it was zero. By all means, let's work to make college more affordable, but let's make college more affordable for college students.

So take a look at who early college is serving and how it is serving them. In a time when we are concerned with declining enrollment, let's keep kids in our schools. In a time of difficult financial decisions, let's keep the money for pre-K to 12 education in our pre-K to 12 schools. And as we contemplate state-wide graduation requirements, let's say "you're not done with high school until you are done with high school."

Please support H779, sponsored by my own representative, Ela Chapin of East Montpelier. This proposed legislation would:

- Repeal early college
- Expand dual enrollment from two classes to four
- Create a group to study college level offerings for high school students

Questions in Senate Education (Thank you for your questions! I'm recording these as I remember them and have taken the time to elaborate on my responses.)

- What are the differences between early college and dual enrollment? — These are two separate programs which both make it possible for high school students to earn some college credit. Early college students are technically unenrolled from high school for the year. They take a full load of college courses, which could be either in person or online, and they follow the college schedule. They are still allowed to participate in high school extracurricular activities including sports. Early college is only available to high school seniors. Dual enrollment also falls under the Flexible Pathways umbrella and gives juniors and seniors a chance to take up to two college courses while still enrolled in high school. Sometimes this means arranging their schedule so they can take in person classes at nearby colleges (I had a student last year who took a class at Norwich two mornings a week and arranged her MHS schedule so that she didn't have a first block class). Sometimes dual enrollment takes the form of online classes, often but not always through CCV. Finally there are some high schools that partner with a college/university to offer dual enrollment courses at the high school as

part of the regular high school schedule. These courses are taught by high school teachers who have gotten their syllabi approved by the college/university awarding the credits. For example, U32 has partnered with CCV to offer a Composition and Literature class as well as with Norwich to offer a Statistics class.

- Can students also get college credit for AP classes? — Advanced Placement (AP) is a program run by the College Board and is a nationwide system designed to create rigorous college-level course offerings for high school students with standardized final exams in May. They are taught as part of the regular high school schedule by teachers who have had their syllabi reviewed by the College Board. Many VT high schools offer a range of AP options, and students often opt to take them because of the challenging and in-depth curriculum and because they “look good” on their transcripts. Students can also earn college credit for AP courses if they do well on the exams, but this decision is made by the college they attend. For example, UVM grants credit to students if they earn a 5 (the top score) on any exam and credit for 4s and 3s depending on the specific subject area. Dartmouth offers credit for a few AP exams, exemption from lower level classes for some, and nothing for others. For example, a 5 on the AP Statistics exam would earn credit, a 4 or 5 on the AP Latin exam would earn no credit but would mean that student could skip straight to a higher level Latin class, and a 5 on the US History exam might have helped that student get into Dartmouth but wouldn’t earn any credit or enable them to skip any intro history classes once they were there.

What about students who choose early college and value this option to take more challenging classes? — Yes, while this program exists, it’s hard to tell a student who is interested in it, “no, you shouldn’t take advantage of this opportunity” and seems selfish to say “no, you shouldn’t leave high school early because we’ll miss having you here.” That’s why I’d like to see a systematic re-set of the expectations for what senior year in high school looks like. Our high schools big and small across the state offer an amazing array of challenging classes, and we also have the other elements of flexible pathways, personalized learning, and our tech centers. If a student says “there’s not enough left for me to do in high school” my first question is “really?” followed by “what are you interested in? Let’s look at the program of studies together.” This is also why H779 would expand dual enrollment. In addition, for some students early college isn’t what they hoped it would be. In his testimony to the Senate Education Committee, Eric Hutchins added to my testimony by telling the story of a student who was drawn to early college especially for financial reasons, enrolled in all or nearly all online classes, and found those classes to be “full of AI slop” and not the rigorous college experience he imagined it would be. At U32 the number of students enrolled in early college dropped from 33 last year to 23 this year in part because of a concerted effort from a group of students to “have a real senior year.” Finally, if we are concerned that high school isn’t offering enough rigorous classes, the solution isn’t to send kids to college early. The solution is to make sure that we are challenging them appropriately in high school. Let’s use the existing Education Quality Standards and engage in the current conversations around state-wide graduation requirements to make this happen.