

To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Nicole Miller, Executive Director, Vermont Afterschool
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Date: February 26, 2026

Re: H.817 – An act related to mental health support and substance use disorder prevention in schools

Good afternoon, my name is Nicole Miller and I'm the Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool, a nonprofit organization that works to strengthen afterschool and summer programs, empower youth, and expand access so that any child or youth in Vermont who wants to attend a program, can do so. Our organization works directly with all types of afterschool and summer programs and the professionals that work within them – child care programs, schools, public libraries, parks and recreation, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, museums, teen centers, and many other youth-serving organizations. I am a member of the Afterschool and Summer Advisory Committee created through Act 78, and our organization serves as the Vermont entity for both the 50 State Afterschool Network and the National Afterschool Association. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about H.817.

Vermont Afterschool strongly supports H.817, believes there is an additional and supportive role for afterschool and summer programs to play in youth mental health to complement the school day, and is an eager partner in this work.

Afterschool and Summer Programs Support Mental Health

We know that Vermont's youth are concerned about their own mental health and well-being¹, and that of their peers.² Vermont's schools certainly have a strong role in supporting youth mental health through mental health literacy and peer support initiatives. Additionally, we encourage the committee to consider how to use the out-of-school time space (afterschool, summer, before school, weekends, evenings) and the programs operating within that space, to supplement what is built during the school day and year. Youth spend approximately 20% of their waking hours in school, and significant time in the third space – outside home and school. Decades of research show that afterschool and summer programs build protective factors³ by providing opportunities for young people to connect, learn new things, express themselves, access healthy food, and build relationships with caring and supportive adults. Through programs like these, we can help youth build resilience⁴, increase belonging, and leverage additional time and space to support youth mental health. This benefit of afterschool and summer

¹ 2023 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey Statewide Report.

² "Public Comment - State Youth Council Youth Mental Health Committee." *Vermont General Assembly*, 11 Feb. 2026, legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2026/Workgroups/Senate%20Government%20Operations/Vermont%20State%20Youth%20Council/W~Claire%20Zandstra~Public%20Comment~2-11-2026.pdf. Accessed 26 Feb. 2026.

³ Yamashiro, Nikki. "New Issue Brief: Afterschool Fostering Protective Factors." *Afterschool Alliance*, 2024, www.afterschoolalliance.org/afterschoolsnack/New-issue-brief-Afterschool-fostering-protective-factors_09-24-2019.cfm.

⁴ <https://afterschoolalliance.org/afterschoolsnack/Social-media-mental-health-and-the-role-of-afterschool-and-01-12-2026.cfm>

programs is validated⁵ by voters, parents, and youth themselves across the county, with a majority of parents agreeing that afterschool programs support children’s mental health and well-being (79%)⁶.

Vermont Afterschool as a Partner in Mental Health Literacy and Peer Support Initiatives.

Vermont Afterschool offers a wide range of professional development workshops, both for afterschool and summer programs and schools. Some of those workshops related to mental health literacy include:

- Redefining Resilience
- Resilience & Youth Wellness
- Youth Thrive (2-day training)
- Youth Mental Health First Aid (1-day training, for adults working with young people)
- Inspiring Adolescents Through Understanding the Science Behind Them
- Deescalation (Flourish Lab)
- Acknowledging and Validating (Flourish Lab)
- Bank of Trust (Flourish Lab)
- Reaction to Response (Flourish Lab)
- Bias (Flourish Lab)
- Basics of SEL (social emotional learning)
- Empowerment as Healing Practice
- Foundations and Applications of SEL (7-part, 18-hour series)

Additionally, we are experienced in advising and training peer groups and have built and collaborate on youth leadership, agency, and voice initiatives.

- Youth Thrive for Youth (peer-led, youth ages 14-26)
- Teen Mental Health First Aid (for young people in grades 9-12 or ages 14-18)
- Crafting Advocacy: How to Share Your Story for Impact as a Youth
- Vermont Youth Project
- RAYS – Raise Awareness for Youth Services (public health, in collaboration with the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program)

Vermont State Youth Council, including the Youth Mental Health Subcommittee.

Lastly, Vermont Afterschool is the support organization for Vermont’s State Youth Council, created under Act 109 of 2022, is a group of 28 youth, ages 11-18, from all walks of life. Of its five subcommittees, one is the Youth Mental Health Committee. Annually, each subcommittee creates a set of recommendations, which are then presented to and voted on by the whole State Youth Council, which are then combined as a full set of recommendations. From there, the Council is tasked with providing these recommendations to Vermont’s

⁵ https://afterschoolalliance.org/afterschoolsnack/Voters-parents-and-youth-agree-Afterschool-supports-mental_05-04-2023.cfm

⁶ <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2025/AA3PM-Lost-Opportunity-Afterschool-in-Demand-But-Out-of-Reach-for-Many-Full-Report-2025.pdf>

Governor and General Assembly. Additionally, they are responsible for holding public hearings, sending out surveys, and communicating with both individual peers and other youth groups throughout the state.

In this year's recommendations, the Youth Mental Health Committee shared ideas related to:

- funding the building of an inpatient eating disorder facility that accepts youth aged 11-17;
- instating a statewide minimum number of excused mental health days for middle and high school students, including additional days for those who have a diagnosis from a certified clinician; and
- to pass legislation to fund multi-year grants to teen centers, ensure teen spaces have high-quality staff and diverse and accessible opportunities, and fund new teen spaces.ⁱ
- 2026 Recommendations: <https://www.vtstateyouthcouncil.org/recommendations>

Overall, Vermont Afterschool supports H.817, sees a way to leverage additional spaces where youth and young people gather outside of school hours, and is a willing and able partner in this work. I am happy to support the committee as you work on this bill.

Thank you.

ⁱ *Vtstateyouthcouncil.org*, 2026, www.vtstateyouthcouncil.org/recommendations. Accessed 26 Feb. 2026.