

TO: Senate Economic Development Committee

FROM: Colin Robinson, Vermont-NEA Political Director &
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DATE: February 6, 2025

SUBJECT: S. 37 An Act Related to Unemployment Insurance and Benefits (for support staff
in public schools)

Introduction:

- Vermont NEA represents all licensed public school teachers in Vermont, as well as teachers at two of Vermont's four historic academies (teachers at Burr & Burton Academy, and Lyndon Institute). We also represent most of the educational support staff across the state. 30% of Vermont-NEA's roughly 13,000 members are educational support staff professionals.
- Today, we are only speaking to Section II of the bill.

Context:

- Educational support staff in Vermont public schools are some of the most vital yet overlooked members of our school communities. Their occupations range from paraprofessionals to food service workers, to bus drivers, to custodians, to administrative assistants.
- Educational support staff members safely transport Vermont students to school every day, regardless of road conditions; they nourish our children - providing them with the essential nutrition they need to learn; create and maintain clean and safe learning environments; and assist and support Vermont's highest needs children every day. Our schools genuinely would not function without them.
- Simultaneously, support staff are among Vermont-NEA's lowest paid members - making on average less than \$19.00 per hour (average wage in Vermont is: \$30.18; per Vermont Public Radio 7/2024).
- This workforce is also 80% female (from 2018 Rutgers Study - provided to Committee).
- Retention of these skilled workers is crucial to providing Vermont students with the support and education they deserve and the schools our communities deserve.
- Without the ability to simply be eligible for Unemployment Insurance, schools lose these crucial employees every year as they move on to other higher paying jobs elsewhere. We have massive support staff shortages across the state, especially for paraprofessionals - without whom mandated special education services cannot be provided.
- At the end of the day, this bill would simply provide the basic right, that all other workers have, to apply for Unemployment Insurance ("UI") - nothing more, nothing less - rather than simply being denied the ability because they work in our public schools.
- This exclusion is unique to school support staff and a historic anachronism (refer to Economic Policy Institute "EPI" handout provided to committee)

Mechanics:

- This is an easy fix: eliminate 21 VSA 1343(C)(2) so that school support staff are not specially excluded from eligibility for UI. This would amount to treating them as essentially all other workers who are furloughed without choice because an employer is inoperable for a period of time, like our ski industry or construction trades.
- Many of these workers would choose to work for the full year if they could - they are passionate about their work and the children they serve - but are unable to do so by no choice of their own. This is one of the reasons that UI exists. This statutory change would provide economic security to these critical workers.
- This law has been changed elsewhere, such as Minnesota in 2023 and Oregon starting in 2019 and fully implemented in 2024.

Addressing Concerns:

- Costs would be small relative to the total Education Fund; estimated to be \$5.6 Million by the Economic Policy Institute.
- Furthermore, all other employers have similar obligations, why should our lowest paid school employees be treated differently? There is no justification for the current exclusion.
- Also, many of our support staff members work summer jobs, and make more money there. They would continue to do so regardless of UI eligibility, but at least this would give them the option, especially in desperate times.