

## Written Testimony to Senate Education Committee

From: Melissa Connor, Director of Stafford Technical Center – Rutland, Vermont

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Good afternoon. My name is Melissa Connor and I am the Director of the Stafford Technical Center in Rutland, Vermont. Thirty years ago, I began my work in CTE here in Vermont. I have served as a teacher of Business Education and Assistant Director at the Technical Center at Springfield, now the River Valley Technical Center, and for the past 10 years as the Assistant Director and Director at Stafford.

As a Vermont high school student, I knew that I wanted to work in the business field and that I enjoyed working with people so my high school counselor told me that I should apply to college and be a business major. The one time I expressed an interest in learning about the Rutland Area Vocational Center, now Stafford, I was told absolutely not as I was college bound. My parents did not attend college so they just said do what your school counselor tells you to do, so I did. I attended Castleton State College as a business major and ended up changing my major 5 times. Ironically, I ended up as a Business Education major and did my student teaching at the Rutland Area Vocational Center and I found my calling and I have been dedicated to CTE ever since. CTE is not just a job to me. It is a passion. CTE helps students find their passion, helps them learn where they fit into this world and how to navigate it, and it lets them find their niche in a way they have never been able to beforehand. It is helping invaluable tradespeople and other professionals make the tough decision to leave their career and venture into teaching where more often than not, they take a pay cut and have to take college classes for licensure. It is making connections with our community to listen to them and help prepare the next generation of employees that will benefit their industry and both our state and local economies. It is helping families understand the opportunities that are available at their local CTE center as it often is still a misunderstood educational opportunity.

So, what does this long ramble have to do with the proposed changes from the Governor and other state leaders. Nothing and everything. No matter which proposal we go with I feel that it is imperative that the following items are given focus to. This is nothing new as VACTED has testified to this in previous sessions as have I.

1. Non-competitive funding & access– We must find a model of funding that does not hurt our partner high schools when a student wishes to attend their local CTE center. Every Vermont student should be able to follow their own path in their education and their partner high school should not fear the budgetary implications of a student making this choice. We need to have a funding system that is collaborative and supportive of student choice.
2. Graduation requirements & recognition of our embedded academics towards those requirements – At Stafford Technical Center we serve, at times, up to 11 different high schools plus home school students. Graduation requirements are different at 8 of those high schools. As a full day technical center that offers academics, it makes it incredibly challenging to meet the graduation requirements of each of these schools while also

ensuring that they have enough time in their technical program area where they are earning college credits and/or industry recognized credentials. Some high schools are VERY specific about the types of math, English, science, and social studies credits they want their students to have upon graduation. This one size fits all approach does not always work for a student enrolling in CTE. I use math as an example. A student in our Construction program learns and uses Geometry every day as part of their day. Some high schools will recognize the embedded math as a math credit toward the requirements while others see it as a math elective, which may or may not count toward their required math credits. Every school does it differently. It is important to note that the way the current regulations are written, CTE centers recommend credit and high schools award credit. Students and parents should know going in what credits they will or will not be earning towards graduation. Currently at Stafford we can only tell them this is what we recommend but you should talk to your high school about what credits you will actually get and how they will count towards graduation requirements.

3. Growth of Staffing & Facilities – You cannot have one without the other. Our state is in desperate need for nurses, auto techs, electricians, plumbers, and carpenters. In reviewing our applicants for the 25-26 school year, Stafford had 50 applicants to our first year Health Careers program and currently we can only accept 12 of these students. Why? We cannot hire a second instructor due to the huge wage discrepancy. We have two instructors for Electrical & Plumbing and can accept 32 students – we had 76 applicants. Auto Tech we can accept 16, we had 62 applicants. It is like this for many of our programs. We currently have 380 applicants for a max capacity of 262 seats. We either cannot find an instructor or we do not have the space to grow the program. In order to be able to build a program we need to be able to pay our staff the industry standard and have the space to expand. Right now, we are struggling with both.

I could go on and on with more examples but, in my opinion, the ones I just cited would create huge shifts for our students in Vermont and, in turn, our state as a whole. What is the magical formula? Until I see the full APA report and modeling of the proposals it is hard to say but in my professional opinion, a model that does not consider the items cited above, as well as the points that are part of the VACTED recommendations, will only further the current issues facing not only CTE, but the entire educational system in Vermont as we “battle” for declining enrollments. I am serving on the AOE CTE Policy Sprint Team for the Governor’s proposal and look forward to learning more about this model just as I am eager to learn about the other proposals out there. It has taken us decades to get where we are and I humbly request that we not rush through a transformation that we do not fully understand and that does not meet the needs of our students, our families, our employers, and our staff.