

Community Schools Testimony for Senate Education Committee

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An Introduction to Community Schools

We have learned since the Vermont Legislature passed [Act 67 \(2021\) - the Vermont Community Schools Act](#) that our schools, students and communities are and can be strong and vibrant, especially when we provide the tools, resources, relationships and leadership to make that visible to the broader State community. We believe strongly that we have a powerful education transformation tool at our disposal, one with a proven evidence base at the national level and one with a developing body of data and research at the state level that is worthy of investing in and scaling statewide - Vermont Community Schools.

In 2021, the Vermont State Legislature passed Act 67 which embodied a culmination of more than two decades of education legislation, policy and reform efforts that have included the likes of [High Schools on the Move](#) (2003), [Act 77](#) (2013), the [Education Quality Standards](#) (2014), [Act 46](#) (2015), [Act 173](#) (2018), and [Act 1](#) (2019) to name a few.

The notion of Community Schools comes from a long and storied history going back to the end of the 19th century, and has more than 45 years of research and data following the passage of federal legislation in 1974 and amendments later to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in [1978 establishing Title VIII - Community Schools Act \(PL 93-381\)](#) extending the community education program established earlier.

The U.S. Department of Education continued to support what eventually became known as [Full-Service Community Schools](#) through competitive grant funding going back to 2008. In 2015, legislative language was included under [Part F of the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (also known as ESEA) defining Community Schools. In this legislation the term “pipeline services” was introduced and may be instructive to note here based on its alignment with Vermont’s stated goals:

“(3) PIPELINE SERVICES.—The term ‘pipeline services’ means a continuum of coordinated supports, services, and opportunities for children from birth through entry into and success in postsecondary education, and career

attainment. Such services shall include, at a minimum, strategies to address through services or programs (including integrated student supports) the following:

“(A) High-quality early childhood education programs.

“(B) High-quality school and out-of-school-time programs and strategies.

“(C) Support for a child’s transition to elementary school, from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school into and through postsecondary education and into the workforce, including any comprehensive readiness assessment determined necessary.

“(D) Family and community engagement and supports, which may include engaging or supporting families at school or at home.

“(E) Activities that support postsecondary and workforce readiness, which may include job training, internship opportunities, and career counseling.

“(F) Community-based support for students who have attended the schools in the area served by the pipeline, or students who are members of the community, facilitating their continued connection to the community and success in postsecondary education and the workforce.

“(G) Social, health, nutrition, and mental health services and supports.

“(H) Juvenile crime prevention and rehabilitation programs.

Consistent with the federal program, Act 67 included the four national pillars and added a fifth:

- Integrated Student Supports,
- Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities,
- Active Family and Community Engagement,
- Collaborative Leadership and Practices, and
- **Safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments.**

Community Schools in Vermont

With the passage of [Act 168 \(2024\)](#), the Vermont Community Schools Act (Act 67) continues to be a positive vision for public education that delivers on the key points of agreement that so many of the various plans and proposals currently in front of you identify:

- the provision of high-quality education PK-12;
- student-centered and integrated instruction, supports and services;
- family and community engagement and partnership; and
- efficient implementation that improves the lives of students, families and communities.

In four years of implementation the State has only appropriated \$1M of State Ed Funds (for FY25). In that same period, with initial ARP-ESSER funding (approximately \$3.1M over three years), the AOE in partnership with UVM were able to leverage nearly triple that investment through using and securing additional grant funds.

This year, with the state funding to support implementation and scale of VT community schools – a systems-wide approach to the funding, governance and delivery of public education in Vermont – we now have **11 supervisory unions/districts actively engaged in the implementation and/or expansion of community schools.**

Table 1: Community Schools in Vermont Summary Table (FY22 - FY25)

Cohort	SU/SD	# Schools	SU/SD Population	# of CS Schools	CS Student Populations	(+CTE)
1	Addison Northwest Supervisory District (ANWSD)	4	848	1	246	
2	Burlington Supervisory District (BSD)*	11	3,736	3	955	1
1	Caledonia Central Supervisory Union (CCSU)	7	1,253	1	155	
2	Essex North Supervisory Union (ENSU)	1	362	1	192	
2	Kingdom East Supervisory District (KESD)	7	1,078	7	1078	
1	North Country Supervisory Union (NCSU)	11	2,711	11	2711	1
1	Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (OSSU)	7	865	2	296	
2	St. Johnsbury Supervisory District (SJSD)	1	615	1	615	

2	Washington Central Unified Union Supervisory District (WCUUSD)	6	1,416	1	708	
1	White River Valley Supervisory Union (WRVSU)	10	1,140	2	251	1
2	Windham Southeast Supervisory Union (WSESU)	9	2,349	2	536	1
Totals		74	16,373	32	7,743	

The table above provides a conservative portrait of the impact of community school implementation. A summary of this legislation’s influence is as follows:

- **≈21% of SU/SDs** in Vermont have received an Act 67 community school grant;
- **≈26% of VT public schools** operate in SU/SDs working on implementing the community schools model;
- **servicing ≈20%** of the state’s publicly-funded population and **educating ≈23% of the enrolled population;**
- **≈9% of students are currently attending grant awarded community schools** which constitutes **11% of our schools** (conservative estimate based on original applications and excluding partner schools and tech centers).

(State data pulled from the [AOE State Profile Report Re-release](#))

Community Schools are an Investment

A few comparison data points to consider in the VT Ed Fund context. This FY25 investment of \$1M for community schools is:

- 6X less than what is appropriated for higher education institutions through flexible pathways (DE and EC) which served a total of 2,763 students in FY24 (this includes those students who don’t complete these programs) [DE + EC in budget bill = \$6,043,000];
- 4X less than Early College which served [410 students last year](#), with only 387 of those students being publicly funded (23 of those students being Home Study students who have opted out of public education and who are not counted in the ADM) [EC in budget bill = \$4.2M];
- From a “program” perspective, we spend:
 - \$129.15 per student for the Community School grant program versus,
 - \$2,187.16 per student for Dual Enrollment and Early College programs combine, or

- \$10,243.90 per student for Early College alone.
- Overall, this means we spend 16 times more on roughly 3X fewer students for programs that are accessible to a significantly smaller portion of the student population (junior, seniors that are college ready).

Return on Investment: National Evidence and Local Efforts

- Synthesis of cost-benefit research “suggests an excellent return on investment of up to \$15 in social value and economic benefits for every dollar spent on school based wraparound services” (Oakes, 2017)
- Recent ROI research was conducted in New Mexico focused on Community School Coordinators. This [report](#) states, “The calculated ROI represents the value of the benefits contributed to the community school by the Coordinator as measured by the ratio of the net benefits to the costs. The **ROI results were positive producing a 7.11 to 1 ratio, meaning for each \$1 invested in the cost of the Coordinator the school received \$7.11 in return.**”
- As a result of conversations with your colleagues in House Education last year, we recently contracted with Apex consulting, who led the New Mexico Community School Coordinator ROI study cited above, to tailor the ROI process to align with Vermont rural community schools.

Community Schools Have an Evidence Base

Data summaries ([State-level supports](#); [CS data](#)) demonstrate how effective this framework is at developing and sustaining coherence and integrating community resources; [digital stories](#) make visible the complex reality of the relational enterprise of public schools. Community Schools is not a program, it’s a vision for public education that is effective, efficient, equitable and proven.

Nationally, research on community schools has produced an evidence base.

Table 2: National and Local Research Base

What National Research Says	What we’re seeing in Vermont Community Schools
community schools “[...]meet the needs of low-achieving students in high poverty schools and to help close opportunity and achievement gaps for students from low-income families, students of color, English learner and students with disabilities ” (Oakes, 2017);	WRVSU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 100% of students on IEPs with grad goals graduated on time FY24 NCSU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 78 students participated in dental screenings/necessary procedures in FY24 through 802 Smiles partnership.

	<p>CCSU (Cabot School)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 external student referrals in FY24 <p>ANWSD (Vergennes Elementary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 unique community mentors • 172 hours of mentoring to elementary students under 10 y.o. in FY24
<p>community schools have [...] lower dropout rates, improved academic performance and reduced risky behaviors (Heers, 2016);</p>	<p>OSSU (HUHS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% reduction in absenteeism in 9th grade over the past three years • More than 30% reduction in disciplinary referrals <p>WRVSU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7% decrease in the number of behavioral referrals (FY23 to FY24) <p>NCSU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student participation in Restorative Truancy Program doubled; grew from 12 (FY22), to 17 (FY23), to over 25 (FY24), ALL seeing a reduction in absenteeism
<p>students at fully implemented community schools scored significantly higher than their peers in other schools on standardized math and reading tests.</p>	<p>CCSU (Cabot School)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 50% in grades 1-6 and 25% in grades 7-12 participate in the AfterSchool Program. • 100% participation in SeniorX Capstone Project-Based Learning Program (FY23&24) • 100% of Seniors had college/employment after graduation FY24 <p>WRVSU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73% of 4th graders at Bethel Elementary were proficient or exceeding on the spring ELA VTCAP (FY24) • 75% of WRVSU Students in the 6th grades across the WRVSU were proficient or exceeding on the Math VTCAP (FY24) • 77% of 7th Graders at First Branch Middle School were proficient or exceeding on the Math VTCAP (FY24) • 72% of 10th graders achieved the national benchmark in reading (FY24)
<p>"Generally, the longer and more effective a community school has been operating, and the more services a student received, the better the outcomes" (Oakes,</p>	<p>We are seeing strong evidence of relational trust and improvements in the school climate of our Act 67 community schools, evidenced by staff retention, increase in student connection and belonging to school, reduction in absenteeism, and more social gatherings.</p>

2017). In Baltimore, results related to improvements in daily attendance and chronic absenteeism emerged after 5 years of implementation. **“The Baltimore results underscore the importance of allowing for sufficient time for community school programs to mature, showing that patience is key when evaluating these initiatives” (Oakes, 2017).**

OSSU:

- **100% staff retention** FY23 & FY24
- Reduction from 7 formal grievances to 0 within two years
- First ever staff-requested holiday party in close to ten years

CCSU (Cabot)

- **100% staff retention** in elementary grades FY23 & FY24

Systems-level change takes time. Our educational policy making process, including funding decisions, should align with the necessary timelines for preventative and systemic change as outlined by national research.

Fundamentally, Community Schools are not singular programs or strategies – it’s how we do school. The Community School framework is a systemic rethinking of how to deliver public education that aligns with our student-centered, community-based approach to teaching and learning. Community Schools close equity gaps through the provision of services, resources, and opportunities in school in service to academic success as well as individual and community well-being. Most importantly, Community Schools leverage Vermont’s unique context, history, and values through place-based services and relational assets in rural communities by emphasizing deeper learning by doing, schools as centers for community connection, and co-location of services for students, families, and community.

1. Community schools keep the community in school.
2. Community schools center and sustain democracy and increase civic engagement.
3. Community schools promote partnerships with families, community members and organizations.
4. Community schools aren’t prototypical - they’re personal.

As a collective of schools, educators, education leaders, researchers, and community and post-secondary partners we have continued this work. Please consider preserving the educational gains made during significant disruption in the education ecosystem (from global pandemic to flooding to education transformation to measles). Please consider continuing this powerful legislation and state funding of Community Schools.