



Date: 2026-02-06

Subject: Therapeutic School Testimony

From: Elias K Gardner, Member & Director, The New School of Montpelier

Mr Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about therapeutic schools.

I am a special educator by training and Director of The New School, a therapeutic school where I have worked since I first started as a 1 on 1 support staff nearly 20 years ago. I am also a product of Vermont's public schools and a strong believer in public education being an essential pillar of a strong state and democracy. My goal today is to highlight that the role therapeutic schools play in Vermont's education system is distinctly different from that of other independent schools. Therapeutic schools are a part of the public school continuum of services not a replacement for public schools.

The New School is a mission based worker cooperative. We have therapeutic school programs in Montpelier and Newport. Founded in 2005, we are a learning community committed to preparing individuals with unique and complex challenges for successful lives. We use evidence based practices to promote independence, communication, social/emotional skills and academic growth, within a culture of safety and belonging. Our very name comes from a student's excitement at having a new school where they finally fit in.

What this means in practice is that when students first arrive at The New School their experience of school is often a demoralizing series of failures and traumatic incidents. Our role is to help them feel safe, find belonging, and to build relationships with them all prerequisite for learning.

Vermont has an ecosystem of 26 therapeutic schools. Each offers a unique environment catered to educate a subset of Vermont's most complex learners. Therapeutic Schools can only accept students who need special education services that are referred by a public school. We work for public schools. We carry out individualized education programs written by public schools only when the public schools have exhausted their resources and determined that we are the least restrictive environment capable of offering a free and appropriate public education. We are a part of the public schools' continuum of services. We would not exist if public schools did not need and ask for our services.

www.nsmvt.org

Montpelier Campus
11 West Street
Montpelier, VT 05602
phone 802-223-0647

Newport Campus
363 Bluff Road
Newport, VT 05855
phone 802-227-4083

Berlin Campus
199 Burelli Farm Drive
Berlin, VT 05602
phone 802-223-0647

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Therapeutic schools are regularly reviewed by the Agency of Education, approved by the State Board of Education and have rigorous ongoing oversight from the AOE including reporting within 5 days any changes in enrollment, programs, policy, facilities, financial capacity, staffing and administration.

It is often in part the small size and alternate governance structures that allow therapeutic schools to be nimble and quickly adapt individualized programs to the ever changing needs of each student.

In recent years the State Board of Education has defined therapeutic schools as a distinct subset of independent schools, however, much of the legislation and regulations still appear to be written with only a few large independent schools in mind.

To name a few examples:

H.813 among other things requires independent schools to report student performance to the community. Therapeutic schools already report student performance to their sending public school. Requiring both the public school and therapeutic school to report the same student's performance to the public is duplicative, confusing and an unnecessarily waste of resources. With the small student numbers common in therapeutic schools there is also a risk of violating confidentiality.

S.253 requires public school budgets to include the names of independent schools their students are enrolled in. Including therapeutic school names could have a negative impact on student privacy. Years ago The New School had a student from a small district where our tuition was a large portion of the special education costs and showed up distinctly in the budget. Everyone in town knew a significant driver of their property tax increase was this particular student's education. The student and their family were the recipient of considerable anger from other townspeople, it led to further isolation, and very nearly to the defeat of the school budget and the student not getting the education the public school's IEP team had determined the student needed.

To reiterate, in closing therapeutic schools serve a distinctly different role in our public education system than other independent schools. We are not a replacement for public schools but their partners and a part of their continuum of services. Legislation that recognizes this will increase clarity, predictability and ultimately result in a better education for students.

Thank you for your time,
Elias K Gardner
Member & Director
The New School