

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Education Committee
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA Executive Director
DATE: January 24, 2025
RE: Vermont-NEA Introductory Testimony

Thank you for inviting me to talk a little bit about Vermont-NEA’s priorities and about how we can work together to ensure that all Vermont students can succeed and become happy, productive adults. I am Jeff Fannon, the executive director of Vermont-NEA. I’m joined today by Vermont-NEA’s elected president, Don Tinney, who is a 31-year English teacher, and Colin Robinson, Vermont-NEA’s political director. During the session, you may see Don, Colin, and me, as well as Rebecca McBroom, Vermont-NEA’s general counsel. Additionally, Don will briefly discuss with you today some specifics “from the field,” given his background as a teacher.

Vermont’s public schools are the centers of their communities where generations of students have learned, explored, played, and thrived. Not to brag – well, maybe just a little – our schools then and now have consistently outperformed nearly all of their peers across the country. That doesn’t mean we can’t do better, but as I boast of our schools to my peers around the country, they are envious of the success we have and the significant involvement and support Vermonters have given their local schools.

That support didn’t happen by accident. Vermonters – and this legislature – invested in their local public schools because they – and you – know how crucial a top-quality public education is to our future. They – and you – also know that for most cities and towns, local public schools are huge economic development drivers. Excellent local public schools are, simply put, crucial to our state’s growth and success.

That remains true even after the unprecedented challenges our public schools faced – and met – with the onset of the global pandemic. Indeed, what the pandemic showed us was that our schools are a safe haven for kids; a provider of meals to all students; a place where students and their families can rely on even in times of turmoil. And behind it all are the state’s dedicated public school employees: the teachers, paraeducators, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, librarians, school counselors, administrators, and local school boards. They work hard to ensure that the ravages of the pandemic don’t prevent our state’s children from getting the education they need and deserve, and they meet the unique needs of today’s students every day.

I am proud of our schools, and you should be, too. But that doesn’t mean we are without challenges.

Vermont's public schools remain a strong economic driver for the state. Schools are achieving and recovering from the pandemic, but there are some realities that must be recognized. The mental health system in Vermont is broken, and because schools are where Vermont's children all are found, schools are stepping up in new and creative ways to address the social and emotional needs of students. Previously, these were Agency of Human Services costs out of the general fund, but they have been shifted to schools and the education fund, and these new solutions require human beings, i.e., staff, to provide services inside the schools. Schools need to be celebrated for stepping into the mental health breach not criticized, but their work and corresponding expenses should be removed from education spending. This social and emotional needs work is absolutely critical to the success of our students and schools, and this work must and will continue.

This year, we will focus our work on providing schools with the resources and people they need to respond to the social and emotional needs of students. There remains a shortage of educators, and all of us must devise ways to ensure that Vermont continues to attract and retain an excellent public education workforce. During the pandemic, Vermont-NEA stood up a program called GrowVT-Ed, which, over the past two years, has "graduated" more teachers than any other entity in Vermont. That is an example of our work and public schools' work that supports students, schools, and communities.

Attached is a brief introduction of our legislative agenda. These items were initially created by Vermont-NEA's members, were approved by the Vermont-NEA board of directors, and they guide our advocacy inside the statehouse and beyond.

Before I go, I want to give you a brief introduction to who we are and what drives us.

And now here's a little bit about who we are.

Purpose and Priorities

Vermont-NEA wants all children to have an excellent education. Our purpose is to make sure our members have a satisfying work environment where they are acknowledged for the work they perform and where the work they perform helps students do their best.

Simply put, students' learning conditions are educators' working conditions. They are inexorably intertwined and likewise, our advocacy efforts support both educators and students.

Organization basics

- An affiliation of local Associations of educators (teachers and support staff) in almost all public school districts in Vermont (and more than 320 schools); we also represent the teachers at Burr & Burton Academy and Thetford Academy.
- Membership, including retired teachers and student teachers, comprises approximately 13,000 Vermont educators who belong to their local Association, Vermont-NEA, and the National Education Association.
- Structure: 20-member Board of Directors elected by membership (4 statewide Officers, 16 regional Directors) + executive director *ex officio*. 20 staff members almost entirely

consisting of former teachers who train our members to bargain and administer their own collective bargaining agreements.

- Vermont-NEA is an affiliate of the 3-million-member National Education Association.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.