

Date: February 26, 2021
To: Representative Kate Webb, Chair
And House Committee on Education members
From: Dr. Kathleen Kesson
Re: H. 106 Testimony

The movement for community schools signifies an emerging consensus that the achievement gap between white dominant class youth and youth from low-income, immigrant, racial minority, and other marginalized social groups can be attributed to out-of-school factors related to poverty, and that the barriers to academic achievement can best be removed by expanding the role of the school to include wrap around family support services such as extended child care, physical and mental health services, and meeting the nutritional needs of all children.

We express gratitude to Committee Members James and others for their proposal to fund a Community Schools initiative that acknowledges the importance of these factors. Community schools, enriched by legislative policy already in place around Flexible Pathways, Personalized Learning, and Proficiency-based Assessment (Act 77) and driven by concerns for educational equity and social justice informed by Act 1 open opportunities for collaborative, cross-sector innovation and provide levers that might increase the resilience of local communities and revitalize Vermont schools. In a spirit of collaboration, our testimonies will offer some suggestions that might improve the capacity of the legislation to ensure that H160 will truly benefit all young people and fulfill its promise to deepen equity.

This aim to ensure more equitable academic outcomes for all students is at the heart of the community schools movement, and parallels the many current efforts around educational equity in Vermont. We want to emphasize, as you move forward, that community schools can provide Band-Aids and treat symptoms, or they can be levers for the kinds of educational systems change necessary to really revitalize our local communities, equalize opportunities, and educate all young people with the knowledge, skills, and capacities they will need to survive and thrive in these complex and uncertain times ahead of us. The necessary changes will need to be wider and deeper than the provision of social services and good nutrition, important as these are. Much of this is beyond the charge of your committee and will sit with the education community charged with implementing the process. We believe it is important that the language of equity feature prominently throughout the bill, however, so that this focus does not get lost anywhere in the process.

Models of community schools vary widely in their themes and purposes; some are organized around mental health and trauma-informed practices, some are created in response to unique cultural aspirations, and some are designed specifically for New Americans. We believe that Vermont, with its historic commitments to 'small d' democracy, its devotion to its local schools, and its many vibrant grassroots movements around racial justice, sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and social welfare is uniquely situated to create and implement community schools that might serve as models of how education and

communities can partner in ways that foster community resilience, youth engagement, and participatory democracy. In order to fulfill this transformative vision of community schools, we need to provide the legislative foundation for genuine school/community collaboration all the way through the process, starting with communities envisioning what they need and desire from a community school, through the application to become a pilot site, decisions about leadership, and on into the implementation of a new model. Genuine collaboration requires broad participation, with a diversity of income, race, gender, newcomer status, language, ability, etc. represented in all activities and reflected in the faces of leaders and decision-makers in schools and communities. The testimonies that follow will reiterate these themes of equity and democratic participation. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted by Dr. Kathleen Kesson