

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Elaine Collins. I am a life-long Northeast Kingdom resident, and thankfully my six grown children and six grandchildren are also Vermonters. Working in Vermont schools has been and continues to be my life's work. This is my sixth year as the principal at Newport City Elementary School, my eleventh as a school principal, and my 32nd year working in Vermont schools. In my school in the northern part of the state, of the 330 students in my Pre-K to 6 school, nearly 80% of them live in poverty and almost 30% of them qualify for an IEP or 504. I want to speak to you about the validity of the conclusions of the Weighting Study and how that plays out in my school so that you might consider what are the next best steps in your work.

In my thirty-two years of working in Vermont schools, the work has changed. Poverty, drug addiction and trauma are creating pressure on schools and making our work more complex. Even before the pandemic, we had an alarming number of students who were experiencing housing insecurities, food insecurities, mental health crises, trauma, challenges with emotional regulation, and behavioral challenges. Now that COVID continues to be a challenge for all of us, these issues have been compounded for our students. If we don't meet the social-emotional needs that our students come to us with, no one is able to learn. When I started at Newport City six years ago, our school was in crisis. During my tenure, our school's work has been to build and provide a Multi-Tiered System of Supports for students around social-emotional health and wellbeing.

Before building and implementing these more cohesive and comprehensive supports for our students, we had 890 escorts, seclusions and restraints in one school year. Sit with that number for a moment: 890 over 175 school days. Again I'll say: when we don't take care of the social-emotional needs of our children, no one learns. With adding needed supports to our system, last year that number was at 44 incidents. The work that we are doing to build resilience in our students is making a difference not only in our school but very real differences in the lives of our students and families.

There are significant costs associated with this work. We have two guidance counselors, two school-based clinicians, two nurses, seven special education teachers, a speech-language pathologist, three speech-language pathology assistants, seven academic interventionists, a social-emotional learning coach, two home-to-school coordinators, and a Conflict Resolution Room. We employ 21 paraeducators. We built the Access to Classroom Education (ACE) Room with a behavior specialist, behavior-team assistant, and three behavior technicians. These are positions that were virtually unthought of 32 years ago, or even 20 years ago, but are absolutely essential now in order to be able to allow access to academics for our students. And these costs are currently on the backs of the residents of our community, who are also poor themselves.

I would ask that you consider the work that we are doing – and the cost associated with it – when thinking about the implications of the Weighting Study. Thank you.