



August 13, 2021

Secretary Daniel M. French
Vermont Agency of Education
1 National Life Drive, Davis 5
Montpelier, VT 05620-2501

Dear Secretary French,

On behalf of the hundreds of families the Vermont Family Network serves throughout the state every year, we would like to thank you for your interest in learning about what families need to support their children and youth living with disabilities, special health needs or mental health challenges. The significant ARP ESSER funds provide an opportunity to take action to maximize educational services for students with disabilities.

As Vermont's federally designated Family to Family Health Information Center and Parent Training and Information Center, as well as the state's national affiliate for Family Voices and Parent to Parent, an important aspect of our work is to understand the priority needs of families with children who have disabilities and to educate decision makers about these priorities.

Understanding the complex nature of shepherding family-centered systems, I want to make it clear that VFN is here to partner with the state to ensure that the voices of families and individuals with disabilities are heard and reflected in the design, implementation, and evaluation of Vermont's use of ARP ESSER Funds. Our expert staff are people with lived experience who are ready to contribute as well as lift other family voices in making certain that Vermont's proposed investments make a real and lasting positive impact.

These are the issues we urge the state to consider in the use of ARP ESSER funds:

- **School-based Transition Services for Youth with Disabilities** - Many transition-age students with disabilities missed participating in meaningful community-based services in their transition plan within their individualized education programs (IEPs). These included on site job training programs, community involvement programs, as well as various life skill classes that aim to help these students prepare for life after high school. In addition, these students and others may not have been able to benefit from educational and related services that were delivered remotely, needing in-person instruction and support. These students would benefit from additional education time beyond when they would be slated to age out of the academic system at the

- age of 21. Students with disabilities in the classes of 2021, 2022, and 2023 would benefit from an additional year of transition services within the school system. New Jersey passed legislation approving academic extensions, and other states, including Illinois, Massachusetts and Nevada are exploring similar extensions.
- **Mental Health Services** - Under Act 264, human services and public education work together with families to coordinate services for better outcomes for children and their families. The Act developed a coordinated system of care so that children and adolescents with a severe emotional disturbance, and all children/youth with a disability who are eligible for services from the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services, and their families receive appropriate educational, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, residential, and other treatment services in accordance with an individual plan. Coordination, however, often did not equate to the delivery of appropriate mental health services. The social and emotional toll of the pandemic on all students has been widely acknowledged and families whose children are eligible under Act 264 would benefit from a more robust Act 264 process, including the support and funding of parent representatives to guide stressed families through the paperwork and meetings, and, ideally, support those families in successfully implementing their Coordinated Services Plans. Engaging Act 264 as an early intervention strategy rather than a reactive process to children already in crisis could greatly change the trajectory for individual children and their families. Currently, the mental health bar to get services is set so high that by the time children get into the system, so much damage is already done and the intense services that are needed are often not readily available. Parents have also asked that mental health services through after-school programs be made available in the form of activities that help children work on social-emotional skills.
 - **Academic Services** - Many students have regressed or failed to make progress in their academic goals as stated in their IEPs over the past year. These students could benefit from individualized tutoring services. With the rise of COVID variants and the current inability to vaccinate children younger than the age of twelve, greater funding for access to remote curriculum/instruction would benefit children who cannot attend in-person instruction for health reasons and whose IEP teams agree that remote instruction is appropriate for these students.
 - **Accessibility**- The latest version of Notice of Procedural Safeguards: Rights of Parents of Students with Disabilities is available in English only. While translated versions were available in the past, families have reported that the portions of those translations were substandard and, in some cases, meaningless. Parents of eligible students with disabilities must be notified of their rights in a comprehensible manner. The pandemic further complicated lines of communication which were especially challenging for families whose home language is not English. Funding should be used to provide high-quality, accurate information to parents whose first language is not English.

We truly appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the use of Vermont's ARP ESSER funds, and look forward to hearing more about the Agency's plans once you have reviewed the public comments. We are pleased to be reinforcing strong parent-professional partnerships with AOE and our schools to support great outcomes for all of Vermont's students, especially those with disabilities or special health needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pam McCarthy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Pam" being more prominent.

Pam McCarthy
President/CEO

CC: AOE.EdInfo@vermont.gov