

Good morning. I'm Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently serving as president of Vermont-NEA, representing 13,000 educators across the state. I know you have a busy meeting planned, so I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and will keep my remarks brief. The brevity of my statement, however, does not reflect the gravity of the multiple issues our educators face today.

A lesson we have learned from the pandemic is that our public schools are an extension of the state's healthcare system; during COVID, they have been an integral part of that system for our children and youth. Our school nurses have worked tirelessly to provide services and support to students throughout the pandemic and need to be further supported by the Department of Health, community-based health care providers, and other state and local agencies. As one teacher said in a meeting last week, "Yes, I'm busy and stressed this year, but I'm really worried about our school nurse. She is simply overwhelmed." As you discuss policy decisions over the next year, we ask that you explore ways to make sure that our public schools are seen as communities of healing, not just academic institutions, and that we have policies and rules that promote cooperation amongst healthcare providers, agencies and schools. This, of course, includes the important area of mental health.

The social and emotional well-being of our students and staff must be a top priority this year and every year. Focusing on the well-being of every student allows educators to create a safe, secure and inclusive school environment. In a recent training on behavioral threat assessment in Vermont, a retired Secret

Service agent and a retired NCIS officer made it clear that enhancing a school's climate enhances school safety. Every school must be a sanctuary for every student, so please examine our state policies to assure that they prioritize the well-being of our students and the quality of school climate.

One of the serious challenges to maintaining a healthy school climate has been the personnel shortages our schools are experiencing. The pandemic has exacerbated the workforce shortages that have been identified in recent years; it is a long-term problem that must be addressed long after the virus has been mitigated. While we often see the term "teacher shortages" in the headlines, the shortages include school bus drivers, para-educators, custodial and maintenance staff, nurses, counselors, administrators, food service workers and every job classification in education. As you debate the critical issues facing public education today, please take a moment to look through the lens of workforce development.

Thank you for your attention this morning and thank you for your commitment to public education, the cornerstone of democracy in America.