

Report on Act 48 (H. 480) of 2015

An act relating to making miscellaneous technical and other amendments to education laws

Section 10(c) Recommendations of the Agency of Education with respect to the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund

REPORT
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Submitted to House and Senate Education and Appropriations Committees

**Submitted by Secretary of Education
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Expanding opportunities to learn in Vermont:

Recommendations of the Agency of Education with respect to the Expanded Learning Opportunities Special Fund

In May 2015, the Vermont Legislature passed H. 480/Act 48 which included language which establishes the architecture of a state fund for Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO). No public money was appropriated for the Fund, although the Fund is able to receive both public and private grants and donations. In addition, the legislature tasked the Prekindergarten-16 Council's Working Group on Expanded Learning Opportunities with developing recommendations in partnership with Vermont's Secretary of Education on how to administer the Fund, award grants to communities from the Fund, and build the funding in the Fund.

The Agency is very grateful to the ELO working group (a Subcommittee of the PK-16 Council) and VT Afterschool for all their hard work to expand public awareness of the value of Extended Learning and the availability of extended learning in the Vermont context, and shares their commitment to the importance of Extended Learning in ensuring every child has the help needed outside the school day that he or she needs to thrive.

As we approached this task, our work was framed by the following operating assumptions and principles:

1. Current state commitments exceed the current fiscal capacity of the state. This reality has become acute over the past two budget cycles. Our task is to be extremely strategic about targeting state dollars at the most fiscally effective path to achieve our priorities.
2. Where possible, we should achieve new priorities not by adding new resources, but by transforming how we deliver services.
3. Vermont provides very strong support for education in the form of a statewide Education Fund of almost \$1.6 billion dollars for about 80,000 children. Historically, the states' role, exercised primarily by the legislature and the State Board of Education and the AOE, is to set goals and standards for our schools and children, and to maintain equity in access to opportunities. For the most part, the state then leaves decision-making up to local authorities on how to best meet those goals, on the assumption that local control will enable local decisions about implementation that reflect local circumstances and which are more efficient.

In response to Act 48, the Extended Learning Opportunity subgroup of the PK-16 Task Force put together a request for \$5 million dollars from the General Fund to support expansion of extended learning opportunities in Vermont schools. (See attached.) This represents an additive request, in that it represents an additional demand on the General Fund, additional expenditures on education, the creation of an additional stakeholder group to advocate for access to public dollars. This group would need an allocation to cover the cost of disbursement, oversight, monitoring and auditing of the uses of public dollars.

The Agency has reviewed this report, assessed the current fiscal condition of the state and capacity of state government, and weighed other critical priorities in deciding on recommendations.

To put this “ask” in context, the State is entering the FY17 budget cycle with an anticipated budget gap. We are not in a position to support additional initiatives.

Still, we feel Vermont can approach ELOs as an opportunity to solve a problem not by adding additional costs to the state, but rather by transforming how we use current resources. The AOE estimates that currently, Vermont spends an estimated \$12 million in state and federal dollars on extended learning statewide. We are building on the experience of successful programs to identify how local boards can provide access to afterschool and summer learning through existing revenue streams. For example, we are working internally with AOE staff who manage federal funds, including Title funds, to provide guidance on how schools can use these funds to expand afterschool and summer school initiatives, and to help them braid these federal funds with other funding streams. In addition, the anticipated reauthorization of ESEA potentially creates an opportunity to rethink purposes of federal dollars over the next few years, and certainly provides an opportunity to provide new guidance on allowable uses of federal funds, especially as they relate to extending learning opportunities.

Finally, through our work on Act 46, we will support local efforts to free up resources that can be repurposed to this critical priority. For perspective, by the most conservative estimates, the recent Essex-Westford Act 46 merger is expected to save or free up about a million dollars every year moving forward. These “freed resources” represent resources that could be repurposed to extended learning opportunities. An estimated additional 10 systems are considering accelerated mergers. By conservative estimates, if successful, unification of systems could lead to freed resources and system efficiencies in excess of the ELO subcommittee’s request within just a few years. And, unification of systems frees up administrative time to focus on effective use of funding and development and successful implementation of new programs that address equity

concerns. Act 46 creates a powerful opportunity to rethink and transform how we support educational priorities in order to better achieve our goals.

If the ELO Working Fund is able to attract private dollars to match the existing \$12 million in public investment, we propose any additional private contributions to the ELO Special Fund be used to expand access to programs and opportunities to learn for children from high poverty backgrounds and who live in the highest poverty communities in underserved areas. These funds could be used more flexibly than the current 21C dollars, in that partial awards could be made. We are cautious about “private matching” and competitive grants programs, because these tend to privilege more affluent communities, and those are not the communities where we see the most acute need. The fund and scarce government capacity should prioritize programs that are public-private partnerships or public school-based programs in which at least 40% or more of children are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Given that scale seems to be a critical factor in program stability and quality, we encourage the fund to more inclusive programs, rather than spreading limited resources across a plethora of programs, as that approach increases the proportion of scarce dollars spent on overhead, rather than on direct service.

The AOE has a clear preference for programs that take advantage of current public infrastructure, including public school facilities, as a way of ensuring that public dollars are leveraging the most possible out of public assets. School facilities are public assets with fixed costs, and should be fully utilized for public purposes. Using existing facilities and assets frees resources for extending hours of coverage.

Full utilization of existing public assets and careful targeting of Agency support and resources, as well as any hypothetical private dollars, would increase access to Extended Learning Opportunities for our most vulnerable children who literally have no opportunities afterschool or in the summer. To minimize new administrative costs and ensure that maximum dollars are sent directly to programs and children where they matter most (and not spent on overhead and administration), we recommend as well that any available funding be applied to proposals that were reviewed and approved in partnership by 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, but for which there were insufficient funds, if funding can be supported for a minimum of five years.

This response would ensure maximum efficiency and sharing of practices with a minimum of new administrative complexity and burden, as well as effective targeting of dollars at our most vulnerable children. We envision these programs will serve prekindergarten through secondary school-aged children and youth outside the school

day on a regular basis, including before and after school and during the summer. Once these extreme needs are met, the Agency does recommend opening the fund to a broader base of the state's children, communities, and entities, if private dollars emerge.