

My name is Kelly Bushey, the owner and Director of Connected Circles.

I feel the need to share that public speaking is one of my biggest fears- so bear with me through this. I believe that the students we are serving need to see me advocating for them because they've expressed that they are feeling forgotten and isolated in this process.

I understand and appreciate the process in which a prospective school needs to go through to become approved by the AOE. I am here this morning to express the urgency and impact this timeline is having on eight current students (and others that continue to be at home waiting for a placement). As of December 1, under the directive of the agency, we are no longer serving students on the Connected Circles campus during the school day.

We, along with several Special Education Directors believe that we were meeting the criteria as outlined in the Aug 23rd memo from the AOE in regards to contracted service providers. However, the AOE disagreed and required that we no longer serve students on our campus.

Since making this shift, attendance has declined, students are refusing to attend classes that must occur in public spaces, and several are at risk of not meeting their goals of graduating this spring. We are losing this vulnerable population of students- hence why I am pushing myself to speak to you this evening- in advocacy of these young people. We want you and the AOE to realize the urgency of this situation and to work with us to move this forward. Every day that goes by, these students are set back even further. They feel isolated and disconnected from their learning and the people they have the most trust in.

The AOE was on our campus on Oct 31st. The first draft of the report was provided to Division Leaders 10 days after this visit. What is the timeline and process from here? It has been six weeks since the first draft of the report has been written. How many division leaders are there? who are they?, what is the expected timeline of this?

I have been told, that NEW applications are taking priority at the AOE and Connected Circles is the ONLY NEW application. Last spring, I was told that the process takes 6-8 months, now it is 8-10- why does the goal post continually move/change? Why isn't Connected Circles on your agenda this evening? Why is the Agency not moving this forward in the best interest of students- on the tail end of a pandemic where these kids need a learning community, relationships, invigorating and creative academic programming- when our state (and country) is in the midst of a mental health crisis? Secretary French, you have been quoted and seen on local news stating that school districts must meet the needs of all students, even in the midst of a staff shortage. Connected Circles is offering another option to meet the needs of some of Vermont's most vulnerable students. If we (AOE, SBE, service providers, etc) have the power and ability to support our young people, why are we not doing so? Why is the process holding students back?

Thank you for your time. I look forward to moving this process forward with you- in advocacy of the students we currently serve and have the potential to serve.