

To: The House Education Committee
From: Rep. Rebecca Holcombe
Re: [H.630](#) –An act relating to boards of cooperative education services (BOCES)
Date: Jan. 10, 2023

Thank you for the extraordinary care this committee puts into making sure our community public schools can lift up every child and prepare every child for the work of building a strong and sustainable civic and economic future for the state.

Thank you also for allowing me to present [H.630](#), which provides school districts with **tools to leverage collaboration and scale** to do more affordable, higher quality and more equitable work on behalf of our communities and children.

Context:

Vermont is a small state with small school districts and small schools. These small districts have to meet all the challenges of big districts. In 2022, we had about 83,500 students enrolled in 98 school districts. These districts have all the same responsibilities as districts in high performing Massachusetts (896,103 students in 316 districts), from providing high quality professional development, specialized settings for students with low frequency but high intensity learning needs, to contracting for busing and food services, to purchasing technology and toilet paper. In Vermont, as health care costs spiral, more social services fall back to the payers of last resort (public schools), infrastructure fails, and schools become responsible not just for funding but for ensuring every prekindergarten child finds a spot in a high quality prekindergarten, the cost pressures are increasing.

VT school districts have to negotiate these challenges without the benefits of scale, which diminishes their purchasing power and pulls their leaders away from a focus on improvement of instruction and to a focus on operational pressures and challenges. Many of the cost challenges are not challenges that are currently in the power of school districts to control.

In addition, this work takes place in a state with higher than average cost of living and lack of the kind of business competition that could drive lower costs. For example, how many food service and bus companies are in the state?

Problem:

Some challenges are too expensive or impractical for districts to solve at the district level, but failure to address them (e.g. failure to have high quality and appropriate placements for all

students on IEPs) drives up cost for everyone. Some administrative challenges are easier to address when leaders have scale. We need to give our district leaders every tool we can to leverage scale and collaboration in ways that strengthen our communities and children while bringing down cost.

Proposed:

H. 630 is inspired by and builds on current local efforts as well as the experience of 45 other states to create “Boards of Collaborative Education Services (BOCES).” The purpose of the BOCES is to provide those services children, their families, and their schools need, but which can be more efficiently provided by leveraging scale across school districts.

Why this approach:

First and foremost, this proposed bill builds on efforts that some regions have already piloted. This bill is simply intended to make it easier for districts to do what many are already trying to do, but in a more efficient, transparent and democratic way.

Some 45 states have already established these structures, and some parts of Vermont have existing informal, non-municipal structures that strive to achieve the same. This is not a new nor untested approach. As municipal entities, they can receive direct financial support, ensure transparency and equity, and provide mandated services to local school districts in ways that other entities and small districts cannot.

Why now?

More than at any time in my experience in Vermont education, school districts face crushing pressures— some aggravated by demographic change, and some made more intense by complicated state and federal statute and rules. And, they need opportunities to develop the local professional capability to address emerging challenges. For example, school districts need solutions and tools that enable them to:

- Pool resources to strengthen and maximize the impact of every available dollar;
- Minimize duplication of programs, personnel and services;
- Support consistent, coherent and quality implementation of mandated programs;
- Ensure that students in every district have substantially equitable opportunities to learn, as well as access to the expertise needed to ensure quality implementation in every school for every child;
- Develop effective strategies to support and educate students with challenging behaviors;
- Develop and retain highly skilled staff, including staff with specialized expertise, on a cost efficient basis; and

- Share ideas and strengthen local capabilities through cross-district sharing, something that is even more important now the AOE ended the on-site [Integrated Field Reviews](#).

Why BOCES?

BOCES are how districts collaborate to provide services that they cannot provide on their own, or which can be provided more affordably and with higher quality than they can be provided at the level of the individual district. In these cases, a BOCES provides a vehicle for sharing of cost and programs in ways that benefit all members, both financially and educationally. Different states and regions include different education services in the work of the BOCES, but these are examples of the kinds of services that BOCES in other states provide.

The following are examples of the kinds of services and programs BOCES can provide/administer:

- special education services, especially for students with high intensity, low frequency needs
- support for english language learners
- professional development and improvement of curriculum and Instruction
- migrant educational fiscal operations
- alternative schools/programs for students who need specialized settings
- consolidated Federal Programs
- standards and assessment support
- cooperative purchasing
- instructional technology and technology support
- data management and utilization
- career and technical education
- educator and staff pipelines and support for licensure
- grants management

As the [Colorado BOCES Association](#) has explained:

“The success of the BOCES concept is rooted in its cooperative, service-driven philosophy. Each BOCES exists because the school districts it serves see the value of the services provided. Individual districts may lack the personnel or the fiscal resources required to provide a broad range of administrative and student services. By pooling resources, districts reduce costs, avoid duplication, and provide for a more comprehensive range of services and programs.

Being service-driven, BOCES have the flexibility to respond quickly to the evolving needs of today’s changing student population. Programs can be developed, training provided, or outside expertise engaged as situations arise. BOCES also understand that

school districts do not exist in isolation and most reach out to engage the community-at-large.”