

February 21, 2024

To: Vermont House Education Committee

From:

Libby Bonesteel, Vermont Superintendents Association Board of Trustees  
Jeff Francis, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association  
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Re: Education Cost Drivers and Potential Solutions

The Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) issued a brief survey based on the House Education Committee's request to inform its focus on "short- and long-range strategies to bend the cost curve on education spending." The survey asked long-form questions about cost drivers and potential short and long-term solutions. There were 37 responses to the survey out of 69 VSA members, 35 of the responses were from superintendents. This testimony aims to summarize the major themes identified through the survey responses. Short and long-term solutions were indistinguishable from one another in the survey results, as some of the solutions could be categorized as multi-step and could vary in timeline based on policy approaches. We should stress that these ideas are of individual superintendents and have not been vetted by the collective membership of VSA.

#### **Cost Drivers:**

- Cost of providing services outside of education, particularly mental health services
- Cost of operating the number of schools within the number of governance structures with declining enrollment and deteriorating school buildings
  - Small schools, class size, number of personnel
- Cost of administration for state mandates (e.g. PCBs)
- Tremendous upward pressures on salaries and wages, resulting in higher collective bargaining settlements - in general - than in the pre-pandemic years

#### **Potential Solutions:**

These potential solutions are summative of the survey responses. Any policies in consideration should be deliberate and based on sound analytical data regarding education spending as it relates to educational opportunities and outcomes. Policy decisions should not be considered in isolation and should instead contribute to an overall vision for Vermont education.

- Analyze the increased cost of societally-driven mental health services in schools
- Fund mental health designated agencies
- Enable regional collaboratives for students needing high levels of support

- Consolidate schools and districts, providing adequate facilities, offerings, and qualified staff members for all students
  - Consider middle and secondary school size based on research that finds high schools of 600 to 900 students ideal for opportunity and quality (Visible Learning, Hattie)
  - Look at the optimal configuration of elementary schools within existing districts
  - Reduce the number of personnel working in the system
    - Create a uniform class size policy
    - Examine the cost of operating multiple central offices
      - Immense reporting requirements for small districts
- Create state policy arising from the facilities condition analysis and school construction aid report to optimize investment in “newer and fewer” school buildings
- Examine, understand, and address high per-pupil spending districts
- Stop unfunded mandates (e.g. PCBs) and conduct a cost/benefit analysis on all recent mandates
- Consider a statewide teacher contract that could contribute to greater equity across the state
- Address the growing cost of healthcare
  - Revise the statewide bargaining process
- Collaborate with higher education to improve teacher prep programs to address costs associated with growing training needs for early career educators