



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date: January 5, 2024

Subject: School Safety and Budgetary Pressures

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director the Vermont Principals' Association.

School Safety Bill: Act 29 of 2023

Let me start by thanking the Agency of Education and Rob Evans of Margolis Healy for their work on school safety and hearing thoughts from the field to make drills meaningful, effective, and pragmatic without unnecessarily increasing student feelings of trauma. And I'd like to especially thank Johnson Elementary School Principal, David Manning, who serves as the VPA Representative on the Vermont School Safety Advisory Group (SSAG). Although this process has not been going smoothly at all times, I think school leaders are feeling pretty confident about how drills are to be scheduled and appreciate enhanced flexibility and the increased ability to quickly follow changes as made by the Vermont School Safety Center when it comes to school safety drills. .

The one area in which I have some concerns of substance has to do with the creation of School Behavior Threat Assessment Teams. It is important to note that schools are in different places and that the law (rightly) has different expectations for schools that already have these teams in place versus school districts who have just started developing these teams. One concern from our members, who are the school leaders that oversee the day-to-day operations of Vermont schools, centers around procedures being in place that clearly articulate the expectations for how these teams should operate. A straight reading of the law and certainly the legislative intent of the law, was for the Agency of Education to put forth a policy that included procedures to govern the implementation of Behavior Threat Assessment Teams. In the meetings I have been a part of on this issue, it seems that the AOE simply plans to refer school districts to a manual that exceeds 100 pages. I hope this does not occur as my members need simple procedures

that are easy to understand and implement - they really don't have the time to be looking through a manual when they are engaging in school safety work along with the vast multitude of other responsibilities they contend with on a daily basis.

I believe that we were supposed to have a model policy and model procedures by Mid-December, but to date we do not have a model policy and model procedures. The AOE is of course aware of this and is hopefully working on a resolution that will be supportive of the field.

Budget Pressures

The second topic I was asked to address is the financial picture and what schools are sharing as cost drivers contributing to budgetary pressures. Here is an incomplete but pretty robust list:

- Increased percentages of staffing costs as filling licensed educator and support staff positions continues to be very difficult
 - This supply and demand issue has compelled districts to raise salaries and other compensation mechanisms in order to compete for a dwindling workforce
- Health insurance costs increasing by on average 16.5%
 - School districts have no control over this variable whatsoever as this is all negotiated now at the state level
- Concerns about how the new pupil weighting system will play out in various communities
 - People are really concerned about this and until we have a little time with the new system there is a level of ambiguity that is tough for people to deal with - our system of financing education is all so interdependent that there has always been
- ESSER funds going away but the needs of the children still stark
 - Decision districts are making: Either continue to provide services by shifting funds to local budget or stop providing the service
- PCB mitigation and associated costs and ongoing concerns with no real solutions in sight
- School construction and deferred maintenance issues at an all time high
 - This cost is getting worse and will continue to increase unless addressed
- Schools that want to do the right thing by having full day PreK programs are disincentivized to do so by not being provided appropriate taxing authority for PreK students similar to K-12 students
- Public schools are stepping into the void left by a porous mental health system to try and triage the very real mental health crisis that children in our state are dealing with.
- Transportation and contracting costs are very high and school districts have very little control over these costs
- We fund a very high number of small public and private schools with taxpayer dollars for the relatively small amount of students we have in the state (this is a continued cost driver that sooner or later we have to decide if we want to deal with it ... or not)
- Unfunded mandates (e.g.' PCB's;public dollars financing private entities; Universal Meals; etc.)

Respectfully submitted, Jay Nichols

