

Testimony of Jeanne Collins Deweese to House Ed on Bill H258

March 1, 2023

Greetings and Introduction

- My name is Jeanné Collins Deweese
- I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the delivery of publicly funded education under H.258
- I am a lifelong educator with most of my professional service taking place in Vermont public schools both rural and urban, supervisory unions and districts
- My Vermont service includes:
 - Special Education Director at Washington West SU/ Harwood District now
 - Burlington SD Special Ed Director for 5 years and Supt for 9 years
 - As supt in Burlington, we created two magnet public schools and offered an in district elementary school choice system that allowed students and their families to choose from different themes of education which was totally publicly funded. I also partnered closely with afterschool programs and local colleges and organizations to bring opportunities to all students in Burlington, such as the arts and sustainability.
 - Rutland NE Supt for 8 years and oversaw the merger under Act 46
 - RNESU includes Otter Valley, a district with a high school serving 6 towns and Barstow, a two town district with a preK-8 school and which tuitions high school students out.
 - In FY 22, 90% of Barstow HS students choose a public school option, primarily Rutland High School which is nearby, as well as other regional high schools such as Otter Valley and Proctor.
- Active member of several professional associations -
 - Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators -Trustee and officer including president
 - Vermont Superintendents Association- Trustee and officer including president
 - Vermont Principals Association where I currently serve as a mentor to new administrators and will serve on the professional development committee
 - I have served on national boards such as American Association of School Administrators and Council of Administrators of Special Education
 - Vermont Gail Lynk Special Education Administrator of the Year in 2004
 - UVM Distinguished Educator 2009
 - Vermont Superintendent of the Year in 2011

- Retired as VT superintendent in June 2022 and remain active through mentoring and coaching superintendents and principals, and supporting school boards as needed.

Values

- I believe public school is the very cornerstone of democracy in our country.
- I believe that public education is designed to serve every student, regardless of need, sexual orientation, or identity, means, or ability
- I believe that in a world that feels more divided than ever before, the need to educate students of varying backgrounds, wealth and race together is more necessary than ever in order to evolve as a city, state, or country
- I deeply value the principle of equity, defined here as offering all opportunities with the supports in place for all students to achieve.
- Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union aspires to this principle of equity:
 - The landmark public school financing law of Act 60 was the result of a child from RNESU. Amanda Brigham of Whiting was the lead plaintiff of the Brigham v State of Vermont case that led to Act 60, the most equitably funded education system in the country

Transition

- Identifying these values is important as context to my testimony, as in my view, H258 is fundamentally about support for Vermont's public education system and its ability to serve all Vermont students with rich and equitable opportunities within a transparent and accountable funding system.
- As I will speak to later in my testimony, I truly believe that the General Assembly must act to ensure equitable access to a strong public education system is in place as the right of every child in VT.
- I intend to speak freely - perhaps more so than a sitting superintendent can speak, as I do not need to fear repercussions for my job or future career moves
- Second, Share personal observations, experiences and perspectives, which I recognize may not be shared or experienced by others.
- Thank you for considering my testimony as a contribution to all you will hear and consider in your deliberations.

Testimony

- I will start by responding to testimony I just learned about from publicly funded private school students who shared with you that their private school education had changed their lives by removing them from a situation in public school where they were being treated poorly by peers and placing them in a better situation in a private school.

- The stories and perspectives of these students are legitimate and useful;
 - However, I don't agree that a move to a private school is the only way to address the issues that occur in public schools. Nor do these issues only occur in public schools. Harassment and bullying is rampant across our culture with both children and adults, and all schools, public or private, are a microcosm of our society.
 - Currently, VT lawmakers have ensured the policy of public high school choice. Students who desire a different peer group or a different focus have the legal option to attend a different public high school in VT than their local school. This law has been around for over 20 years and has worked well for a number of VT students, in my experience at Burlington and Otter Valley UHS, who chose to leave their neighborhood school for a variety of reasons and experience the offerings of another school.
 - The deliberation of this committee is not how to respond to individual situations, but how to improve the entire system with equity, transparency and accountability overall.
- Economics
 - The VT system relies both on the need to maintain “a competent number of schools ” per the Vermont Constitution, as well as, in some towns, offer open choice systems if no local school option exists.
 - While Vermont's overall population has remained relatively stable, a demographic shift toward an aging population has resulted in declining student enrollment, which in turn has led to increased per pupil education costs.
 - A dual system of publicly funding both public and private education compounds this dynamic, as local public school budgets must respond annually to student populations while accounting for the private school tuition over which they have no control. The funding of this dual system of education is at the taxpayer's expense.
 - When money leaves the public education system and flows to the private education system, the students “left behind” suffer the pressures of a district needing to offer equitable opportunities and lawfully mandated programming with fewer dollars available. While the number of private school students is relatively small (about 5%), shifting state dollars to private schools destabilizes resources for the 95% who attend public schools.
 - The amount of resources shifted from the public schools was not available to me at the time of preparing this testimony. However, the

VT AOE has the data on the actual cost of public funded private school tuition in state and out of state as this is reported annually by all school districts in the annual statistical report. If the committee is interested in knowing the specific cost of publicly funded private school tuition, you need only to check with the AOE.

- Neil Odell from VSBA gave a presentation to your committee, I believe, that illustrates how paying tuition to private schools drives up the per pupil cost in public schools. In my experience, this was felt quite keenly at Barstow School last year as the board was developing the current school year's budget and contending with an unusually high private school enrollment number for high school.
- I would like to share this example with you:
 - Barstow School serves two towns: Chittenden and Mendon and runs a Prek- 8 school with high school choice
 - The Barstow board determines what the Barstow School will offer its students from PreK through 8th grade. They are responsible for whether or not to hire a full time or part time art teacher, music teacher, librarian, what class sizes they will have, whether they need to add supports for a given grade based upon needs and how to maintain their lawfully mandated programs. In order to determine a budget the voters will approve, the board must reduce the preK-8 programs in order to absorb the private school tuition they must pay to schools both in and out of Vermont, over which the voters have no oversight.
 - The above-mentioned VT legislated public high school choice program keeps the public funds in the public system, therefore ensuring the foundation of public education transparently remains available to serve all students.
- Equity
 - Over the past two years, the Barstow board has stepped out in front of the discussion of equity and has been committed to creating an equitable education system. In the spring of 2021, they were in the process of finalizing an equity policy for the district and came to the realization that they were not meeting their own policy on equity when they offered school choice to high school students.
 - They spent the summer of 2021 looking into their private school enrollment data and spoke with parents who did not choose private

schools. They learned that there were reasons for this that had to do with equity:

- The fee to apply to private schools was prohibitive to those who did not have the means to even start the process.
- Some private schools charge additional fees beyond registration. By way of example, Mount St Joseph charges fees for technology, lab, textbook, and has fundraising obligations which deter many families before they even get to the registration fee
- Transportation to private schools is an issue for some families.
- Admission criteria in private schools often speaks to a “fit” with the mission statement as criterion for acceptance. For example, “fit” means a child with a disability that the school cannot or will not serve removes that school from a family’s options. Another example is a religious school whose curriculum is homophobic. Families indicated that they would not even apply as they know their LGBT child would not be accepted or even be welcome.
 - An example of why parents might be concerned about this “fit” played out in the paper this week as the Mid Vermont Christian School withdrew from the Vermont state basketball tournament when it was scheduled to play against a school with a transgender child. As noted in the article, *“Earlier this year, Mid Vermont Christian School [submitted a letter](#) to the state Agency of Education seeking permission to receive public tuition funding while also asserting that it reserved the right not to follow all of Vermont’s anti-discrimination laws.”* All public schools are required to not discriminate against any student.
 - Concerned with these equity issues, Barstow School Board chose to explore moving to designating three schools for choice as opposed to open choice, as they felt they could provide more equitable options for students. Thus they advertised and held a public forum for input from their community in the fall of 2021.
- The virtual forum was well attended, over 80 people came and about a quarter spoke.

- Interestingly, the forum was also attended by several non-residents, including Oliver Olsen, then-chair of the SBE, and Deb Bucknam, the former Republican candidate for Lt Governor in VT. Mr Olsen spoke several times against the idea of limiting school choice, as did Ms. Bucknam. I also note that Mr. Olsen continued to attend Barstow Board Meetings for a while longer to continue to advocate for open school choice..
- With the school choice advocate voices as loud as they were at the forum, it became clear to those present that to not agree with the loud voices was too risky; thus many who wished to share a different view did not speak. Several of these people did submit comments in writing and some expressed their fear of speaking in the forum and disagreeing with the loud voices. In effect, they felt bullied in that forum.
- The board ultimately concluded that the board alone should not change this culture of allowing open school choice but remained concerned that the current school choice program was in fact harmful to some of their students.
- They did not pursue the question at the polls and asked that the legislature look at the issue of equitable access to educational programs for ALL Vermont children, and to end the practice of having families make decisions based on finances and fit.
- The question before you today is not whether or not to have private schools. The question is whether VT believes in the democratic principles of public education and is committed to support with public funds an equitable, transparent and accountable public education system for all of Vermont's children, regardless of ability, religion, sexual orientation.