

To: Vermont House Education Committee
From: Peter Burrows, VSA President
Re: H.258 Testimony
Date: February 24, 2023

My name is Peter Burrows, and I am the current President of the Vermont Superintendents Association, and Superintendent of Addison Central School District. I am one of 55 superintendents across Vermont that lead public school systems.

I share this testimony on H. 258 with great immediacy, as I look across our country and within our own state and see the unnerving dismantling of our public education system. I implore you to step up and look closely at the known impacts to students in our state that will arise from not acting to address the increasing movement towards privatization with public education funds. With recent Supreme Court decisions, the very real onset of privatization is coming to Vermont.

I have had the opportunity to talk with superintendents across the country, who have shared just how pernicious privatization has become and what its impact has been in further stratifying student outcomes. In a state where we have championed equity, access, and inclusion and woven them into the fabric of our legal frameworks and cultural beliefs, we cannot wait longer to see how all of this will play out. I believe we are at a tipping point where not acting now will have dire consequences for future generations.

At face value, it's understandable to support choice in education, and to see choice as a logical extension of a commitment to democratic ideals. It feels good to be able to select what fits for you and your family. And yet, when you look at the systemic barriers that many in our state face, you begin to see that the illusion of equal access runs head on into the reality of class. Lacking means and context, many do not have access to options open to those who can deftly navigate the educational system. Allowing for privatization to take hold will erode our public schools systems and exacerbate the inequities we are working intensely to solve.

This is an incredibly divisive topic. Having lived through the development and denouement of Act 46, I have seen state leaders get behind the ideals outlined in that Act and then retreat from those ideals later on when swelling public opinion shifted positional tenacity. Clearly, there is no solution here that will not face significant scrutiny and backlash.

To support a democracy in this country, we need to support a strong public education system with diverse perspectives. Those systems need to respond to the opportunity gap and the fact that there are systemic barriers that marginalized students face that require us to work together, collectively, to make our schools strong anchors for their local communities and vehicles for students' personal and academic growth. By supporting further privatization of public educational funding, we are taking a step away from a commitment to schools that serve all children, that tackle the intractable equity issues that we've created through the educational systems we've built. We are walking in the wrong direction, away from the values and beliefs we've articulated as state leaders.

H.258 is an effective way to satisfy both the federal constitution and the Vermont constitution, and preserves the place of the historic academies and the therapeutic schools in Vermont's educational system. It minimizes disruption by maintaining the roles of those institutions and grandfathers in students currently enrolled in other private schools. While this isn't a perfect solution, it does ensure greater equity, accountability, and transparency for all schools receiving taxpayer funds. Clearly, whatever solution is found must have rigor and directly address keeping public funds in public schools or, when public funds are going to private schools, that those schools fully honor the values of equity, transparency, and accountability in a manner that fully responds to the fact that they are publicly funded.

I have great faith in this legislature and its commitment to equity, and it is now up to all of you to carry this work forward to take action and protect public education. VSA embraces the values of the Education Equity Alliance and hopes that this Committee and the General Assembly use H258 as the framework to bring this thorny issue to resolution.