

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Jeff Fannon, Executive Director, Vermont-NEA  
Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

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SUBJECT: Reflection of Vermont's Education System

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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today. Too often, the conversation around education revolves around money – tax rates, funding formulas, school budgets – and not on who should be front-and-center: Vermont's children, our future.

Of course, discussions of school finance are a necessity. But at this time – when we are just beginning to recognize the effects of a shattered social safety net, a global pandemic, economic upheaval, and increased trauma – we must put the needs of our students first. They must have all of the resources they need to succeed. They deserve schools that are staffed adequately and fairly, so that the needs of all students can be addressed. They deserve schools that aren't filled with toxic chemicals; that aren't crumbling; and aren't kept together with duct tape and hope 20 years after the state made a decision to let school buildings decay. And students deserve educators – thousands of your fellow working-class Vermonters – who are paid fairly; have robust healthcare benefits; and whose working conditions allow them to be the very best they can be so that all students can thrive.

You've heard from superintendents and school boards, who have eloquently laid out the cost pressures they face this year, through no fault of their own. A once-in-a-generation confluence of events – Act 127 and its 5 percent cap provision; loss of federal funding; crumbling infrastructure that has suffered from decades of neglect by the state; increased social service needs; inflation; and a rise in health insurance costs – has led us to where we are.

Additionally, we want to highlight the presentation your committee received last week regarding the education workforce from Andrew Prowten from the AOE and John Castle from VREC. While your committee took the lead on critical medium to long-term investments in the educator workforce with language passed in the budget last year, it is still very difficult to attract and retain high-quality educators. As was highlighted by Andrew, data from the US Department of Education shows that as of July 2023 Vermont was second only to Alaska in the loss of educators, with nearly 10 percent fewer school employees than before the pandemic. There is no quick fix and the work of folks like Andrew, John, and Vermont-NEA's own Juliette Longchamp – as well as Vermont-NEA's own GrowVT-ED program – are beginning to help. What these programs won't do is help increase the morale and support that educators need to serve their students the best they can.

The state's role in this perfect storm is challenging. The passage of several laws increased the burdens on schools, and the way schools meet those burdens is to hire staff to accomplish that work to assist students. Act 46, for example, was an educational opportunity law that suggested school governance changes would create

new structures that would provide students with greater educational opportunities. Reviewing the success of that law is a worthy endeavor. Additionally, Act 173 asked schools to change how they provide educational services to struggling students, but the 4-year phase-in of that law to allow for professional development (“PD”) provided by the Agency of Education of educators never took place. That PD work has recently begun in earnest, with little support from the AOE, but again, that requires resources to allow a teacher to leave her class to get training, and we cannot and don’t leave students unattended when teachers get required PD. Finally, Act 127 was passed to give schools that had been subsidizing wealthier communities greater spending capacity, and they complied with the law’s intention, which isn’t surprising.

However, instead of talking solely about how to cut costs, we must identify what students need and our communities deserve, and then find a way to ensure that we do not shortchange Vermont’s children. This is what local school boards and school administrators do every year when they work hard with their communities to develop their budgets.

### **Issues for Consideration – Building for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Education in Vermont:**

- **Task Force on Social Services in Schools** – We have heard from our members for over 10 years about the increasing needs of students and have had members testify in this committee in previous biennia about what they saw. The pandemic, to state the obvious, only made it more acute. We need to have a comprehensive analysis of the needs of our students, how schools are stepping up to support their students and families, and how this has shifted cost from the General Fund to the Education Fund.
- **Community Schools** – This committee once again took the lead in the passage of Act 67, the law that established a three-year pilot for Community Schools in Vermont. Make no mistake, this bill was nationally innovative in its use of ESSER funds and application to rural communities. We must not let this drop, but rather should step more fully into this work as a vision for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century public education in Vermont. Like any new initiative, there must be investments before there are returns. We think it is critical that this work continues to be funded and while we envision how to sustain this work going forward. We believe there are federal funds that schools don’t have the capacity to access now but could with additional support.
- **Agency of Education** – Serious conversations about the future of our public education system must include a serious conversation about investment in the Agency of Education. There are good people, doing good work, but they need more support, leadership and vision for what 21<sup>st</sup> Century public education in Vermont looks like. For political reasons, it is reasonable to assume that the request for additional staff and funding won’t come from the Administration but look no further than initiatives like Act 173 to see why there is a need for this type of investment.
- **BOCES** – We know that the Vermont communities have long traditions of collaboration, however sometimes formal structure is better than good, but piecemeal, efforts. We believe the BOCES holds real promise for how we support our students in a 21<sup>st</sup> century public education system by formalizing collaboration to better meet the needs of students, communities and schools with strategic use of resources.
- **School Construction** – Our schools are old. We can’t afford to delay long-neglected repairs; however, we must be intentional and believe the construction task force recommendation and your work so far as a committee are critical to the needs of our 21<sup>st</sup> century public education system. We also think that with state support for school construction through bonding, dedicated revenue, and money from PCB

litigation we can help move the conversation locally about how best to build for the future of teaching and learning. This includes helping local communities transition to newer and fewer buildings.

- **Systemic Healthcare Reform** – Vermont-NEA has been a leader in broad systemic healthcare reform for over three decades. We help lead the coalition to create Catamount healthcare and efforts supporting Green Mountain Care and Dr. Dinosaur 2.0, along with a myriad of other smaller healthcare efforts. This is because our members know that the challenges they face with our broken healthcare system are the same challenges their students and communities are facing. That is why we believe bills like S.98, establishing a Prescription Drug Affordability Board under the auspices of the GMCB are critical and we are leading that effort. We also believe following the lead of state like Montana with Reference Based Pricing is critical to bringing down health care cost for all workers and employers otherwise we are just talking about how we shift who pays for an expensive system.
- **Demographics** – While outside the scope of this Committee, there must be strategic and impactful efforts to attract and retain residents. The leading edge of this is clearly the need for all types of housing. We all know stories of people, including teachers and other school employees, who planned to move to Vermont, had a job offer, and couldn't because they couldn't find housing. There is a fierce urgency to address the need to build more housing for all people and this must be done to ensure the economic diversity of our communities.
- **Education Funding Reforms**
  - **Simplicity and Progressivity** – We have one of the most progressive education funding structures in the country and have for decades. With that progressivity comes complexity. We continue to believe that we should eliminate the residential property tax in favor of an income tax. In the meantime, we should move forward with an effort similar to that proposed is S.52 of 2019, that moved towards an income-sensitivity for all and ensure that those above a certain income level also pay their property taxes based upon income.
  - **Assess the shift from the General Fund to the Education Fund** – There needs to be a true assessment of the impacts of schools absorbing significant costs associated with student social services.
  - **Tax Second Homes** – If you can afford to own two homes, you can afford to pay your fair share to support your community public schools. We know the time horizon for this may be a year or two away, but there are steps you can take now to advance this.
  - **Adequate Education** – We know that Act 127 gave communities with greater needs greater taxing capacity. We know that Act 46, while focused on governance consolidation, was presented as an education equity effort. At the end of all this, we don't know what constitutes an adequate education in Vermont and what the cost of that is. We also know that anything that is deemed adequate is a floor, not a ceiling. This should be studied again to ensure the policy objectives of both Act 60, Act 46 and now Act 127 are able to be realized.
  - **Responding to *Carson v Makin*** – As your committee knows well, the status quo of Vermont's education system died in the summer of 2022 with the US Supreme Court decision in *Carson v Makin*. We have public money flowing to schools that discriminate, period. A little bit of discrimination is still discrimination. It also is a system that, for some, lacks transparency and

accountability for public taxpayer dollars. Vermonters, and specifically, Vermont students and taxpayers, deserve better. While inaction is easy, we continue to find ourselves in a moment that is a call for action. We are here today because that is the call for our public education system. To bring our public education system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century this requires us to align our state constitutional values with the 21st century legal and political realities.