



To: House Ways & Means

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director, Vermont Principals' Association

Date: April 12 ,2024

Subject: Yield Bill

I apologize for not being able to meet with the committee today, Friday, Apr 12, 2024 in person or virtually. I am at a legal conference and traveling back from the same event held in Indianapolis. My written testimony is in lieu of the opportunity to speak directly with the committee and is coming from Reagan Airport in D.C. on Friday evening. These are the points I wish to make on behalf of the VPA after viewing Ways & Means this morning. If any of my testimony addresses issues that are no longer germane because of subsequent changes in the bill please ignore them.

Considerations:

- Make sure that any short term fixes to education finance are fully understood and that more turmoil isn't created for an already fragmented and discouraged field. In many of our schools, we have principals scrambling to rethink staffing as they tell some employees that they won't have a position in the school next year due to budget defeats.
- A third of school budgets have already been voted down at first vote this year. As far as I know, those who have voted a second time have also all been ultimately voted down a second time. Clearly, when voters feel the necessity to vote "no" to a budget they are willing to do that. Please do not make any legislative changes that will make it even harder to pass school budgets in Vermont. This speaks directly to comments I and other executive directors shared about the proposed ballot language changes in a letter earlier this week. Don't make it more complicated.

- Please do not punish school districts that use reserves in a fiscally responsible manner. As a superintendent, I really worked hard to make sure we had reserves for specific purposes, such as building projects. And, even when we were not looking to put money into a reserve we worked as frugal overseers of the taxpayers dollars. When we could find a way to fund something that didn't require education fund dollars we would return reserve funds to the voters as a revenue in the following years budget process.
- Whenever I hear about a floor amount of money per student set by the state with the opportunity for local districts to spend more than that at an additional local cost, I worry about our least well resourced school districts and communities. I'm concerned about eroding the promise of Act 60, that at least in terms of funding, we will equalize the pain it takes to raise a dollar to educate Vermont youth across the state. I often say that all Vermont students belong to all of us. We should make sure that all tax dollars that are funding our education system through the education fund are transparent, accountable, and applied equally to all schools receiving public dollars.
- The same administration that hasn't provided leadership to school districts blames school districts. Draconian moves to cut spending without providing leadership from the administration is not leadership. Continuing to support funding from the Education Fund to go to private entities and businesses without corresponding transparency and accountability is not an appropriate response and is not leadership. Further, to come up with a deferred payment plan at the last moment, without any modeling or details, is very concerning at least in the short term from my perspective.
- Finally, I hear from my members daily about the tremendous mental health needs of our students. Our schools are serving as de facto mental health providers because of the overwhelming need; children often don't get the mental health support they need from our mental health system. These children, with unmet needs, come to our schools every day. At the VPA, I tend to like quotes and sayings to make points. One of our favorite sayings is "You have to Maslow before you can Bloom." In other words, students have to have their basic needs met before they can be successful academically. Right now, the pressure on school leaders and staff is more intense than ever. Please be very careful to not do anything to further erode a public education system that feels like it is under attack in many quarters.

Thank you.

Respectfully,
Jay Nichols