

To: Members of the House Ways and Means and House Education Committees
From: Rebecca Holcombe
Date: April 4, 2024
Re: Providing for a strong, affordable, high quality and fair system of public education and a sustainable education fund

Years ago, I became a principal in a small rural Vermont school, where I was surrounded by three small schools with even greater struggles. At the time, we tutored our students at the high school level, but the schools to which we sent them were telling us they would not commit to accepting all our children, due to over enrollment. We were at a crossroads. Failing infrastructure, persistent high turnover of teachers, high poverty in two of our towns, uneven results, inequity across the districts, unsafe and inaccessible buildings.

Together, we turned education around for our kids and communities. We began with conversations across all our communities about:

- 1) What we wanted our graduates to know and be able to do, and
- 2) How we would know if they do. What does that look like? How do we measure progress, so that we can hold ourselves accountable for improving the learning of children?

We had shared goals. We identified assessments that would help us measure progress and used them to identify which practices actually made learning better. We floated a bond to put all our children into fewer buildings, which saved us money— savings that helped fund instructional improvement— but which was still controversial. At one meeting, a community member fought renovation in one of the most disadvantaged towns, saying “giving those kids a new building is like dressing up a tramp in a top hat.” However, that comment, and that attitude, actually brought us together around the idea that every child was our responsibility.

What was different about that time? We had strong state leadership, a vision, and support for public schools. We had coherent policy, not policy that was working at cross purposes. We had higher expectations and higher trust. We had construction aid. We didn't believe that education was somebody else's responsibility, and we didn't think parents, especially of vulnerable children, should have to fight to get access to a good school for their child. We didn't just see the education fund as the go-to purse to fund anyone and everyone's bright new idea.

This was in the wake of Act 60, and some of our districts had new tax capacity to support needed changes. But making a difference is not just about money— it is about what you choose to spend your money on. We had the VT Institute for Math and Sciences and onsite, state-supported graduate courses in the latest, evidence-based practices to support literacy. We believed in early intervention and data supported decision making.

I tell this story, because our school personnel are working incredibly hard, under deteriorating conditions, to be the change our children need. But this sense that we could do better, this belief that our schools are how we work together to ensure a bright future for our communities and our state, has eroded. We have lost the focus on making schools better, and instead focused on just adding new but often poorly supported choices at every turn.

And it is showing.

Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it delivers. That is true of education in Vermont. If we don't like the rising costs and diminished performance, we need to change our strategy— not just pour more money into it.

And that is why I threw out the previous testimony I wrote, and instead, I am here to implore you to **focus first on figuring out the purpose of a strong and fair system of public education in the 21st century.** Until we figure out that purpose, we can't tackle the incoherence and fragmentation that is currently undermining our educators and eroding opportunity, even as it drives higher tax rates. Until we figure out that purpose, we can't decide what strategies will lead us where we need to go. Before we talk about funding, we need to talk about vision and structure.

A journalist I know told me that sometimes he knows he has been fair when everyone feels a little frustrated with the story. I suspect the solutions we need will be the same; we are going to sink or swim together, so everyone is going to have to give up a little to get us to a place that is sustainable. Two of my districts will have to pay more. One will have to accept some limits on tuitioning, as people are not going to pay to send other people's children to out-of-state prep schools that don't serve students with disabilities and to religious schools in violation of their VT constitutional rights.

You know what some of the other elements are.

We need **sustainable scale, particularly at the middle and high school levels.** For towns that operate, this means targeted consolidation. However this **effort is futile** if it

does not involve limits on tuitioning. Consider the Black River High School, which the district closed because it was too small. Now a much smaller taxpayer-funded private school with no teachers was approved to open in that old building, raising costs to taxpayers statewide and diverting those dollars from making a difference for all kids in nearby schools.

We need to **depoliticize education policy and the state board**. This means putting the AOE back under an independent and representative board, instead of tying it to an unstable, two-year political cycle. I say that as someone who served as Secretary of Education under both a Democratic and a Republican governor, who saw how politicization of the role removed access to nonpartisan, data-informed policy analysis and recommendations that would inform legislative decisionmaking.

We need to address **cost shifts** from state to local budgets. There is no firehose big enough to fill the leaky bucket our public education fund has become. I will say this again: until we put some limits on what public education dollars can be used to fund, there is no way to raise enough revenue to fill the fund without breaking our tax base. For example, from my seat in Appropriations, I get to see how state underfunding of state initiatives drives up cost in local school budgets, but maybe undermines the types of two-generation solutions many families need.

Years ago, I traveled all over the state to speak with districts, communities and legislators about education. I had a slide I often used to close, with a picture of a goose and a golden egg. The goose was the education fund. It was our shared commitment to the shared wellbeing of our children. My fear was that we would kill the golden goose by asking it to lay too many eggs that were not part of our shared vision for our children.

The past two years drove a knife into the goose. From our failure to respond to the Carson decision to the predictable and unaffordable property taxes this year, we have driven a knife into our shared responsibility for the wellbeing of all our children, as well as our ability to do it in a way that people can afford. We need your leadership to help us to build back our shared purpose, and to make the high level changes that free our schools to deliver on it.

Thank you so much for the time you have taken to hear from school boards, superintendents and community members. Thank you for the care you have taken to understand these complex issues. I am grateful to you for working to get this right, not to get this done quickly.