



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols, Executive Director

Date: April 4, 2024

Subject: H. 871: School Construction

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director the Vermont Principals' Association.

Let me start by saying that we fully support the bill and the direction set forward. House Education spent a lot of time and worked hard to get details right. It has been a long time since Vermont has had school construction aid; 2007, in fact. As a result, at least one prominent national study I heard about ranked our public school facilities as the second worst in the nation. If you spend any time visiting schools around our state you would have to concur with that assessment.

The School Construction Aid Task force VPA representative was Chris Young, the principal of North Country Union High School. Should the committee like to hear from Principal Young we would be glad to help facilitate that testimony.

The VPA fully supports the intent behind this bill and we look forward to the recommendations of the Task Force. Obviously, upon delivery of the findings in the form of proposed recommendations by the Working Group we expect to have testimony based on those recommendations that we understand will take the form of proposed bills.

A couple of points we would like to make that are relevant to the bill:

- The Working Group will have a very difficult task and they will have to make some tough decisions as to what to suggest to the General Assembly and then of course you will have tough decisions to make at that point

- It seems from the conversations that I have heard in House Education that all of the experts that have testified have been clear that spending money on buildings that have lost their usefulness is not good policy. When buildings are at a certain point we reach the point of diminishing returns; in those cases we are better off going new and also where it makes sense looking to consolidate as appropriate; this is especially true at the middle and high school level.
- In this process, we need to take care of any buildings that have PCB's or other environmental hazards. We want to make sure our students are in safe buildings and we need to recognize that local taxpayers may not have the capacity to make necessary changes without appropriate level of state financial and technical assistance.
- Love the intent language that focuses on setting clear parameters for the Agency of Education and making clear the intent of the work of the Working Group.
- The ongoing payment plan concept using Vermont's Bond capacity to leverage funds and for the state to pay a percentage annually seems like a reasonable solution to tackling this massive financial burden - we start where we are, we prioritize, and we start moving forward.
- All Vermont children are all Vermont children. We should not look at our children as children of a certain community but rather as a child of the community we call Vermont. We have a statewide funding system in large part because our constitution calls for educating all of our children in an equitable manner. As we look at the school system's physical infrastructure, we should look at building infrastructure as a critical component of a high quality education in today's world. And, as a state we should take collective responsibility for this work.

Thank you.