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State Board of Education

January 8, 2016

TO: Senator Jane Kitchel
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee

Representative Mitzi Johnson
Chair, House Appropriations Committee

FROM: Stephan Morse, Chair, State Board of Education,
William Mathis, Chair, State Board Legislative Committee

SUBJECT: Adequate Staffing, Agency and State Board of Education

We wish to again thank you for meeting with members of the State Board of Education on December 7. We found the conversation helpful and encouraging. We realize that with pending state budget deficits our requests for adequate staffing are not opportune. Nevertheless, without properly supporting your legislated actions, the great gains you have made will simply evaporate. We fully appreciate the sensitivity of our request and are aware that other agencies face similar demands.

While this memorandum is strictly a statement of the State Board our considered view is that both the Agency and the Board need substantial personnel. Our first priority is the Agency. As Chairman Morse stated at our meeting, the Agency had 213 positions in FY08 and currently has 170, a net loss of 43 positions. Furthermore, 70% of Agency personnel are federally funded and are therefore constrained in their operational latitude. Thus, recent cuts have to come disproportionately from the already diminished state positions.

Due to new legislated programs, the duties and responsibilities of the Agency and the Board have increased significantly. Your major new initiatives in early education, dual enrollment, and school governance have been added to an already under-staffed Agency. We also note that the new federal education law adds requirements for data collection and reporting but provides no relief on excessive testing. At the same time, we must rebuild our school evaluation system. Although required by state and federal law, the agency simply does not have the capacity to carry out the law as written.

At our meeting you requested a list of personnel priorities:

Data analysis – With the loss of staff, the agency has become less able to rapidly respond to Gubernatorial, legislative, state board and general information requests from the public, the media and researchers. This has made public and private education less transparent and impairs the ability of all branches of government to apply the latest knowledge to matters of public interest. For example, we do not have a scorecard of finance trends at a time when school spending is under intense scrutiny. We are hampered in identifying economies because we lack the ability to analyze cost drivers. Nor can the state compile a systemic composite of school quality and adequacy indicators at the quality level we need. Special education costs and technical education needs are prime issues that we cannot address as quickly as we should. Capital needs analysis need to be accomplished and our excess facilities need to be identified



and future use determined. For an operation of \$1.5 billion, the agency has basically one available and qualified analyst. There is an immediate need for two more positions – just to get back to where we were 25 years ago. There are many combinations that may work. A mix and match of qualifications is possible such as one advanced educational statistics person plus two lower level data input, cleaning and operations people.

Act 46 Implementation – This issue requires staffing at the Board and the Agency. Each day brings new challenges and complexities in implementing Act 46 for both bodies. The tasks are labor intensive due to the sheer complexity, intensity and massiveness of the cultural and political challenges across the state. Emerging issues such as school choice, district owned property, state-level integration, and representative voting are simply a sampling of the unanticipated legal and governmental issues the Agency and the SBE face. At the board level, we have previously addressed the need for one facilitator, a legal position and a general support position. Two additional agency people are needed. The state has made a massive commitment to school organizational change but lacks the ability to support the changes it has legislated

Educational Quality Standards – The Constitution says the state is responsible for providing universal education. Current law says that each school shall be evaluated annually. For lack of capacity, this is not being done. We must go beyond standardized testing and empirical indicators such as graduation rates. Schools are the units of importance to learning and are best measured through structured site visits and community outreach, along with the hard data. At least three new people are needed to coordinate and carry-out these activities. Also, visiting teams must be school people and these need to be paid a stipend.

Professional Development: Teachers and Administrators – The state suffers from a drought of qualified superintendents, special education administrators, principals and business managers. Given migration trends and population declines, the only realistic way is to train our own through a combination of local, state and federal Title II funds. The state lacks capability at a time when professional development is center stage in the new federal law and in our needs. One administrative oriented trainer is needed to work with colleges and universities, seek and secure funding from various sources and manage this function.

The same is true for teachers. While Vermont teachers provide superb results, we are painfully aware of the large discrepancies across the state and the relatively dis-jointed nature of teacher professional development. This becomes ever more important with the high national standards and requirements. One additional person is required but this is likely not sufficient for arranging and implementing high quality Professional Development across the state.

You also requested what educational programs might be eliminated or reduced. This is not an easy task. I'm sure you understand that whenever a new program is legislated, it develops a constituency that will lobby you for its continuation.



Rather than a “hit list,” we think that it is more important for us to first build and stabilize the new initiatives. We expect Act 46 will have yet to be seen challenges. Adapting to continued declining enrollments will represent crises and anxieties to communities and to educators. On the horizon, we see that special education operations and costs will need our attention. Likewise, career and technical education governance requires review. Teacher licensing represents bureaucratic frustrations. Early education and dual enrollments are off to a good start but must have their periods of incubation.

Our message to legislators is that it is necessary to properly support the existing program initiatives and refrain from new programs, requirements, task forces and special reports.

As you know, the role of the State Board of Education was dramatically changed in 2013. The Board became the education policy making authority and the Department became an Agency under the Governor’s administration. At that time, the law was amended to read that the “Board shall be supported by adequate staff” (16 VSA 161). This staff was to be independent of the Agency. No such staff was provided.

This is an important governmental distinction as it assures the General Assembly and the public the independent policy analysis necessary for sound and proper functioning.

To be sure, the Agency has done an excellent job of staffing the Board. However, as we enter into a new and demanding phase under Act 46, it is clear that the Board will require independent staffing. Early efforts have been positive but it is clear that later activities will be demanding and possibly contentious.

On behalf of the board, we thank you for your time and consideration. The great investments you have made as a General Assembly, the commitments made by the administration, and similar commitments by the board have brought about a constellation of positive factors that we need to press home. These are historic and exciting times for the Vermont educational system.

- c. State Board
Senator Cummings
Representative Sharpe
Steve Kline
Mark Perrault

