

1 **DR14-742 – Expanded Prekindergarten-12 School Districts**

2 **(Draft 1.2; 2/28/14) –**

3 Sec. 1. STATEMENT OF ISSUES AND PURPOSE [*or INTENT*]

4 (a) The General Assembly finds:

5 (1) In *Brigham v. State*, the Vermont Supreme Court stated: "In
6 Vermont, the right to education is so integral to our constitutional form of
7 government, and its guarantees of political and civil rights, that any statutory
8 framework that infringes upon the equal enjoyment of that right bears a
9 commensurate heavy burden of justification." In reaching the judgment that
10 led to Vermont's current finance system, the Court ruled that "the conclusion
11 becomes inescapable that the present system has fallen short of providing
12 every school-age child in Vermont an equal educational opportunity." [cite]

13 (2) Act 60 and 68 [cite] considerably reduced the variability in what our
14 communities spend on education. Nevertheless, across the State, our
15 communities are characterized by sharp inequities in the breadth, depth, and
16 quality of opportunities to learn that they provide. This leaves children in
17 some of our communities ill-equipped to thrive in careers or to take advantage
18 of post-secondary opportunities to which they would otherwise have access.

19 (3) At the same time, technology and globalization and other societal
20 demands are changing what our students need to know and be able to do in
21 order to contribute to building a strong economic and civic future for the
22 State. Notably, our students need to acquire what are generally called
23 "21st century skills," which include the ability to innovate, adapt,

1 handle non-routine problems, reason from evidence, synthesize and analyze
2 complex data, work confidently with technology, collaborate in teams, and
3 communicate effectively through a variety of media. Just as importantly,
4 because many of the low skill jobs that paid a livable wage are being replaced
5 by technology or sent overseas, we have to ensure that all students acquire the
6 capabilities they need to hold or create meaningful work, so that
7 growing inequality doesn't cripple the economic vitality of our State. The
8 remaining low skill jobs will likely be poorly compensated and inadequate to
9 comfortably support a family.

10 (4) These changes place tremendous demands on our schools.
11 Responding to these challenges will require substantial changes in how and
12 what teachers teach, how schools are organized, and what opportunities they
13 provide. In particular, these changes challenge our teachers to rethink the
14 work of teaching to support 21st century skills and challenge our schools to
15 organize in ways that ensure [tight] accountability around high expectations
16 for all students, while at the same time enabling sufficient resources and
17 support to allow flexibility and personalization in how we challenge students to
18 meet those high expectations. A growing body of research suggests that
19 systematic improvement of learning requires a systems level approach that
20 provides teachers with the professional support and high quality information
21 they need to customize learning effectively.

22 (5) In many districts across the State, tight financial circumstances at the
23 local level mean the current challenge of boards is to decide which programs to

1 cut, not which opportunities will enable students to meet our ambitious
2 goals. In addition, the isolation of some districts and schools means they do
3 not have access to critical expertise in special education or assessment or
4 instructional improvement that could help local communities make
5 more educationally and cost-effective decisions about how to meet the needs of
6 their students.

7 (6) Because federal mandates and State obligations impose the same
8 responsibilities on every district, regardless of size, we see increasing
9 proportions of our educational leaders' time — particularly in our smallest
10 districts— consumed by administrative tasks. These tasks are often related to
11 issues such as fiscal audits and federal reporting, rather than focused on the
12 critical work of improving learning. These functions could just as easily be
13 accomplished at a higher level, freeing up capacity for building leaders and
14 teachers to focus on more productive work.

15 (7) In some cases, a merger of governance structures may yield savings
16 that local voters can use to invest in other priorities, or in relief for
17 taxpayers. Over the long run, we expect that the elimination of redundancies
18 and sharing of resources to bend the cost curve, reducing the unsustainable
19 but persistent growth in expenditures we have seen in the State.

20 (8) We understand that a change in governance alone will not yield
21 better outcomes for students. We believe, however, that a strong supervisory
22 district structure will make it possible for our schools to collaborate, share
23 resources, and work systematically to provide more opportunities to learn and

1 higher quality instruction for our children. We believe that the
2 current structure, with its substantial inequities, multiple small governing units,
3 and conflicting lines of authority makes it too difficult for our schools to work
4 together coherently to support our ambitious goals for our students.

5 (9) This current effort is not an effort to standardize learning across all
6 schools. We recognize and cherish the value of our strong local voice and
7 local commitment to our children and our communities. We seek instead to
8 define a governance structure that will support strict accountability for learning
9 with respect to our ambitious goals for Vermont learners, as outlined in the
10 Vermont Education Quality Standards and various statutes, as well as provide
11 local flexibility around strategies for sharing and targeting resources that
12 reflect local strengths and innovative approaches for achieving our shared
13 goals.

14 (b) The Legislative purposes of this act.

15 (1) This legislation replaces our current governance structure, which
16 relies primarily on singular governing units presiding over very small schools
17 and loosely affiliated through a supervisory union, with a unified union school
18 district model that includes multiple towns in one shared governance structure.

19 (2) This new model will streamline operations and facilitate
20 comparisons of operations across districts, so that board members and district
21 leaders can analyze their operations, make adjustments, and draw on the
22 experience of other districts in order to ensure the most educationally and
23 cost-effective decisions possible.

1 (3) Governance reform will bend the curve on expenditure increases
2 over the long term, because board members and district leaders will have better
3 data on which to base their decisions.

4 (4) The new governance model will enable local educational leaders to
5 focus on improving learning in a customized, locally appropriate way, while
6 spreading administrative functions over larger numbers of units to achieve
7 efficiencies in those functions that can be standardized or which are improved
8 when administered at scale. This will enable principals to become
9 building-based leaders of instruction, and superintendents of these larger
10 districts to become systems-level district leaders and managers.

11 (5) In the Vermont tradition of local control, the new governance model
12 involves strict criteria for outcomes and goals at the district level, but supports
13 flexibility around how schools and districts approach those goals. This would
14 support local innovation, while preserving the capacity to analyze effectiveness
15 and compare performance.

16 (6) This new model will facilitate better support and technical assistance
17 from the State to the districts around special education, in the interest of
18 providing more educationally effective, and ultimately more cost effective,
19 strategies for supporting the learning of students with disabilities.

20 (7) Larger districts, because they include multiple schools and serve a
21 greater number of students, have the potential to expand opportunities for
22 school choice to all public schools and eligible independent schools within the
23 district. The ability to include these options and manage grade configuration

1 could foster an array of possibilities regarding the mission and make-up of
2 schools, including grade-specific schools (e.g., prekindergarten through grade
3 three), magnet schools, and schools that provide for more diverse cultural,
4 socio-economic, and educational diversity.

5 **Additional considerations that you may want to include in (a) Findings:**

6 (1) In many areas of the State, we face a profound leadership
7 challenge. 30% of our principals [turn over] every year, on average. This
8 year, over 25% of our superintendencies will also [turn over]. This leadership
9 instability makes it difficult to sustain continuous improvements in learning or
10 to put in place any kind of coherent, comprehensive strategies for providing
11 teachers with [feedback] and support as they develop their practice to meet the
12 challenges of the 21st century

13 (2) Research supports systematic, continuous approaches to improving
14 learning. It is impossible to build coherence in prekindergarten through
15 grade 12 across multiple governing units. The result is a limitation in the
16 educational experience of many of our students that can be corrected.

17 (3) We see some evidence suggesting variability in the educational and
18 cost effectiveness of special education services across districts. We also hear
19 reports from the field that the current governance structure may make it
20 difficult to achieve regional solutions to certain challenges related to the
21 provision of special education services. These challenges include, among
22 other items: heavy reliance on 1:1 aides and limited access to the full range of

- 1 increasingly specialized expertise of special educators, especially in small
- 2 districts.