

**Testimony Regarding the Creation of
Pre-K to 12 Education Systems
Steve Dale, Executive Director, VSBA
February 14, 2014**

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I am here today to participate in your ongoing discussion about the way that we organize our education system. This issue has been on the table for a very long time—at least for the last 50 years. As I watched the 50th anniversary of the JFK assassination and the 50th anniversary of the Beatles, I am reminded that Phil Hoff during that same era pushed hard for restructuring education.

Over the past decade, several serious proposals have been put on the table. You have reviewed those recently. As you have contemplated how best to support the transformation of education and the huge cost drivers that have concerned people throughout the state, it is clear that you are serious about changes that can address these issues. It is clear that you are, first and foremost, concerned about students.

Education in Vermont is a partnership. It is the most important function of government and it requires an extraordinarily collaborative relationship between statewide policy-makers and locally elected school officials. Local boards, at the end of the day, are accountable to their voters for an education system which engages every child and which assures great value for taxpayers—they must assure both effectiveness and efficiency. They must function within a framework of state policy and a statewide funding system. It is in the spirit of that partnership that the VSBA comes together with you and our partners in the education community to help find the best path forward.

The VSBA Board, on Wednesday night, voted unanimously to participate in this process-- the motion reads *“The Vermont School Boards Association will participate in the development of legislation that creates Pre-K – 12 Education Systems designed to: provide students with more equitable access to world-class learning opportunities, ensure greater flexibility in the management of public resources and less volatility for taxpayers, and maintain strong community involvement and support for our schools.”* I will tell you that a couple of members have significant anxiety about this, but they understand the need for us to be fully involved.

The board did not specifically vote to support any particular provision that is listed in your outline. There is strong support for us to come alongside you and try to find a path that achieves our common objectives.

I also want to say that my board has 29 members from 29 different boards-- approximately 10% of all the boards in the state. There are 1425 other board members in Vermont. I have no question that there will be a wide range of opinions among board members throughout the state. We have an obligation to engage them in this process and I expect, over time, that you will get a number of ideas and perspectives from a range of board members.

We would like to talk with the committee as we go forward about the opportunity for some direct contact with our members. You can expect that several folks from the VSBA will want to come testify directly.

Before giving you some preliminary specific suggestions about the bill, I want to share with you a letter that will be going to every school board member later today. It provides some context for you for our journey and to understand principles which will guide the way we approach the process for helping fashion your bill.

Read the Letter to School Board Members

Specific Legislative Guidance

The specifics of a plan will unfold over the next few weeks. We are anxious to be part of the discussion. I would prefer not to get into a great deal of specifics today, but as a place to begin, offer the following ideas in response to some of what has been on the table.

Vermont School Boards Association Broad Guidance for Legislation Regarding Pre-K – 12 Systems Initial Ideas 2/12/14

1. Assure a results-focus. This needs to be about student performance, student opportunity, and system efficiency. Data needs to inform this process, both in planning for change and evaluating the impact. We must assure adequate capacity at AOE to achieve this objective.
2. Commit to creating formal vehicles to assure strong connection to all of our communities:
Maintain strong community involvement in education governance (more board members per student than any other state)

Assure board representation from each town

Include protection against unwanted school closure

Provide for some form of strong community input advising principals on school culture, program, and operations.

3. We understand that you are likely to set an “end date” for a change in the system. We strongly recommend that you set it far enough into the future to do this correctly and to assure that we don’t disrupt education while we do it. This is complex business, districts are varied, and there are countless issues to be addressed when making these kinds of changes (superintendent contracts, ownership of property, collective bargaining agreements, etc.) We strongly believe that you should not shorten the date of July 1, 2019 that was originally discussed. We know some of you are impatient with timetables, given the history of Act 153. I would remind you that Act 153 efforts were voluntary. People made their choices based on those ground rules. You are proposing here to create something new, with a new set of ground rules, and it needs to be given the time needed to do it well.

4. Provide the opportunity for communities to sort out how best to make this work. Don’t prescribe the specific new plan. Create broad criteria and good process. Stay away from maps. Don’t assume which towns can come together in which way —there are supervisory unions which make no sense historically, or geographically, or they are too small or too large and should be reconfigured. There are complex choice situations which need to be sorted out. Sitting at the state level, no one fully understands the history, culture, affinities, relationships within a particular area. Many areas will develop strong plans early in the process. The process for determining required districts late in the process must be thorough and thoughtful.

5. Provide enough guidance for people who are already mid-process or ready to act sooner than later. Be careful not to discourage efforts already under way or that are on the verge of happening. For example we would hope that there would be no barrier for current union high school districts proceeding. There are probably some other fairly simple criteria which could be agreed upon that would provide guidance for the Agency and State Board to approve actions by communities that want to move forward quickly before a design team gets more specific about the long view.

6. Consider providing significant incentives for communities who get in front of this process— e.g. the first five communities to create a Pre-K – 12 Education System qualify. Consider: Tax incentives? Construction Assistance? Transformational Supports (professional development, technology, etc.)?

7. School boards need substantial input into the “system design”. The design team is critical. We would caution you against making this a largely political activity. The draft design should be done by people who know about how the statewide system operates, who know how school

districts work, and who understand the complexities of Vermont's communities and demographics. It can then be looked at by various constituencies for input and comment, and then should be approved through an accessible political process, such as a legislative committee or the State Board. Our understanding of the "system design team" is that it would establish criteria and process for completing the district alignment after July 1, 2017. This should be a priority of the committee and we would welcome the chance to be part of the conversation to sort out details. We have ideas, but I did not want to get lost in them today. However the design gets done, a school board group, appointed by the secretary, with advice from the VSBA, should be able to weigh in on the design. They are the group most impacted through this proposal and it is critical for them to have access to this process.

8. Provide adequate resources to the Agency of Education to support this process. Don't underestimate the magnitude of what you are proposing. They must be able to:

- Provide guidance around mergers

- Assist schools in developing and analyzing data

- Answer key legal questions around complex issues related to choice and district configuration, etc.

9. Education spending and property taxes are consuming this building this year. It will only get worse if there are substantial problems on Town Meeting Day. We are all concerned about the cost per student trend line—it needs to be addressed through a variety of vehicles both statewide and locally—and your efforts here should be helpful in that effort. But it is critical that "immediate savings" not be the objective. I have heard some people say—not in this room—that some kind of reconfiguration should be able to save tens of millions. I want to add strength to the bias of this committee that this effort should not be expected to produce that outcome. I have spoken with my counterpart in Maine who shared with me a seriously flawed effort in that state. Her first comment to me was that "it was over-sold and under-produced" relative to savings. The driver for the process was large-scale savings. It did not produce as advertised and then came apart. Your efforts, as you have repeatedly said, must be about expanded opportunities for students and assuring a strong and effective public education system within a reasonable cost structure. Over time, the changes should have an impact on education spending increases, but don't make it about immediate savings.

We look forward to working with you and others on the many details of this bill that will require continued attention.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS