

House Education Committee Testimony - February 27, 2014 – Rutland, Vermont
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Background

- President and CEO, Tool Factory, Inc. Educational Technology Company, 2000-present.
- Community Chemical Accident Preparedness and Prevention Coordinator, US EPA 1989-1999.
- Sunderland School Board Chair 2006-present, BRSU Board Member 2008-present, VSBA Regional Rep 2012-present. eVermont community organizer – Sunderland-Arlington-Sandgate.
- Sunderland District – One K-6 elementary school with 65 students, 7-12 choice. Burr and Burton, Long Trail and Arlington High School are primary choice high schools.
- Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union – 11 school districts with 2,200 students

Comments on Improving Student Achievement and Operational Efficiencies:

Evaluating governance changes to improve student achievement and gain operational efficiencies:

- For local districts to properly evaluate how they can come together as a new larger PreK-12 System, data must be collected locally and analyzed.
- A Phase 1 Governance Study is typically used to collect baseline data for evaluating whether a governance change would benefit communities. Vermont School Boards Association offers consultancy services to school boards for this. <http://www.vtvsba.org/services/gs.html>. Some examples of Phase 1 Governance Studies can be viewed here: <http://www.vtvsba.org/governance.html>
- The results of the study provide valuable information about community demographics, socio-economic conditions, school structures, student populations and student achievement rates, societal values about schools' role in daily life and more in one report. The report also provides an analysis of options for governance configurations that will help boards, administrators and communities evaluate their structure. Without this backbone structure, districts will have a hard time restructuring in a beneficial way.
- Incentives should be considered by the legislature to make sure there are no financial barriers for communities to conduct the studies. Studies range from \$5K-\$25K depending on size and scope of the study. A grant program could be established and administered by VSA/VSBA to help Districts conduct a study.
- The studies, analysis and restructuring all take considerable time. We have just gone through this process at the BRSU and it took several years. Support from the Associations, AOE and outside technical services will be needed to facilitate and keep the process moving. I recommend funding be put toward using contracted technical support for facilitating local districts to work on their new Systems.

Reducing administrative costs

- By forming new PreK-12 Systems at a size that preserves community engagement, there is the potential to save some administrative costs in the long term after transitional governance costs have ended. Some examples of where the cost savings may come from include:
- Streamline student and teacher assessments through the use of existing reporting (student report cards, for instance).
- Convert assessments and reporting to electronic delivery and collection, minimizing paperwork. This will minimize time spent on these functions and give more powerful and timely analysis of the data collected that can be used at the individual, local, regional and state levels.
- Use real time electronic testing to assess student achievement levels and set new goals for success. The assessment should be cost and time efficient and expandable to assess performance at the individual, the new PreK-12 districts and State levels. Our NECAP testing

provides no real time value for improving student achievement and has a real administrative cost.

- Consolidating individual district level administration at the new PreK-12 System level will gain efficiencies of scale.

Improving efficiencies in learning and instruction

- Prioritize student achievement and cost-efficiency by learning what teaching strategies and class structures are working best to maximize learning opportunities. The book, Smarter Budgets, Smarter Schools, N. Levenson <http://www.smarterbudgets.com> provides many ways to do this.
- Leverage the Internet and new technologies to expand learning opportunities.
- Examine whether anchoring some teaching functions at the new PreK-12 System level for improving scheduling efficiencies (speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, technology integrators). With small schools, sharing staff resources may be the most effective way to create more learning opportunities for students (arts, music, foreign language, sports).
- Create Innovation Education Zones to allow some districts and SUs to develop new teaching and learning strategies that can be then shared with other PreK-12 Systems.
- Strengthen the AOE functions that support these Zones and provide dissemination of the results with others.

Improving operational efficiencies – districts can gain savings through efficiency of scale, careful planning before investments and long term planning. Examples include:

- Leverage purchasing cooperatives for large ticket items such as technology, fuel, copy services and transportation. Many states have regional or statewide purchasing coops that leverage vendor competition for best pricing and value added services.
- Research and invest wisely in new technology - computer technology can become outdated quickly. Choose to invest in large infrastructures such as wireless and wired network systems and adequate internet speed and service. Consider a policy of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) an extension of 1:1 laptop to student computing, where students choose and bring their own mobile computing device to use at school and invest instead in developing a learning management system including personalized learning tools to improve learning goals using mobile devices and laptops. Digital Wish, through the eVermont project has done extensive work in the state on this. Their work is [here](#). There are also lots of articles from large district experiences implementing a 1:1 computing and BYOD program.

Examine special education outcomes and spending.

Despite the conception that there's not much a school board can do about the SPED budget, this is one area of education funding that needs to be examined more closely at all levels. Nathan Levenson at the Fordham Institute has examined special education finance reform in the context of student achievement and has posed these three questions:

1. How much variation in special education spending exists among districts?
2. What can we learn from school districts that spend less on special education, yet achieve the same or better outcomes than demographically similar but higher-spending counterparts?
3. What savings might be realized if the special education field focused on outcomes rather than inputs?

In his report "Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education" he finds that special education staffing and spending among 1400 districts studied varies tremendously with similar outcomes. His report shows that if districts staffed at the national median and used the successful practices of leaner districts, the US could save over \$10B a year. See the report here <http://bit.ly/1bJRVr8>