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Testimony on H. 883 Expanded PK-12 Districts

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I appreciate your work on this important legislation.

My background and context inform my views on H-883:

- Graduated from Cabot High School, so understand the benefits and challenges of small schools in Vermont;
- Worked over two decades with all 282 school districts on governance and leadership development as the associate director of the Vermont School Boards Association;
- Served as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and have been hired as a new superintendent, starting this July;
- Conducted doctoral research at UVM on the Vermont school governance system.

Four Concerns with the Current Governance Structure

1. Missed Learning Opportunities

- a. Difficult to implement PreK-12 school transformation initiatives when leadership commitments can be altered at the elementary, middle, or high school board levels.
- b. Continuity of curriculum articulation and programs can easily be short-circuited by school boards or administrators with value differences or by local school budget failures.

2. Lack of Equity

- a. Students in small schools experience disproportionate program impact from budget cutting decisions made to keep per/pupil funding reasonable.
- b. Most supervisory unions lack the structure or unified commitment to create a management system that maximizes resources.

3. System Confusion and Dysfunction

- a. School administrators and staff spend redundant time and energy serving the fragmented needs of many school boards, which diminishes capacity to focus on teaching and learning.
- b. Individual schools lack system capacity to effectively respond to year to year student enrollment declines.
- c. Rather than utilizing the supervisory union to create efficiencies, many only focus on their local school board and do not take advantage of developing economies of scale.

4. Society Requires an Education Governance Paradigm Shift

- a. History repeats itself. Around the turn of the 20th century Vermont operated 2500 one room schools. However, there was no continuity of program or

guarantee of rigor from school to school. Supervisory unions were created by the legislature to provide more education equity and consistency for all students.

- b. Today global societal and work needs and a constricted economy require education governance to become more streamlined and efficient.

Benefits of H-883

1. PK-12 systems will better support all schools in a governance entity by providing students with comprehensive and equitable educational opportunities.
2. Principals will have a structure that establishes clear direction and allows them to focus on learning innovations for the future.
3. Common Core and related program implementation in all schools will benefit from horizontal team and vertical grade alignment of mission as the system leverages more effective use of staff expertise and financial resources.
4. Allow small local schools to remain open by working within a more collaborative support network of schools.
5. Increase the ability to recruit and retain talented school leaders at all levels. State and national research and experience is clear that leadership turnover disrupts the accomplishment of the educational mission.

A few supervisory unions have voluntarily come together to collaborate in limited ways as PreK-12 systems. However, the process takes too long and can easily be disrupted by leadership changes and political whims. The problem is school leaders expend valuable time and energy, attempting to keep the fragile system intact.

If we really boil down the issues, it's a matter of trust. School boards were created to preserve the democratic values of the community and oversee the delivery of education. It is the role of school administrators to implement the community vision and be accountable to school boards and voters. If we can accomplish this interest and, at the same time, strengthen the education system, aren't we still fulfilling our societal stewardship role?

I leave you with a quote by Peter Drucker, a well-respected management theorist, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths...making a system's weaknesses irrelevant." I maintain our strengths are local schools and great teachers, not the illusion of local control. By working together we can develop a new and more powerful community trust that honors the continued operation of local schools like the one I attended in Cabot. I believe that H-883 has the capacity to create a more overt, stable, and sustainable PreK-12 education governance system, desperately needed to support the rapidly changing needs of society and a global work force.