

Ken Page, Vermont Principals' Association
Testimony on H. 883, April 1, 2014

Thank you for inviting me to speak about H. 883, the so-called governance bill. For the record, I am Ken Page, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. I have been involved in education for over 40 years, with 15 years as a teacher, 21 years as a principal and I now am in my fifth year at the VPA. I have over 30 years experience working in two central Vermont supervisory unions-the Washington Central Supervisory Union and in the Washington West Supervisory Union. In my career, I had the privilege of working at the progressive U-32 High School in 1972 and in 1996, I had the unique opportunity to work with many others in creating a brand new school district called The Waterbury-Duxbury School District. When the towns of Waterbury and Duxbury decided to combine preK to grade 8 education and to set up two new schools: Crossett Brook Middle School and Thatcher Brook Primary School, it was a positive experience for the children, the schools, the communities and the staff. And, it should be noted that this win-win situation, resulted in a tremendous savings for the communities. So, it is with this "I-am-not-afraid-of-change" background that I offer my testimony today:

Last Friday, I met with the VPA Executive Council at Riverside Middle School in Springfield. Among many other things we discussed this important legislation. This statement emerged from our discussions:

"The Vermont Principals' Association Executive Council is fully in support of the intention of House Bill H. 883. As we approach our 100th year anniversary we are keenly aware, now more than ever, of the need to modernize our state's public education governance approach. We see this proposed legislation as a first statewide step in improving learning opportunities for all Vermont students. Additionally, we acknowledge the need for all community members to continue to work together on all aspects of Vermont's public education system. We pledge our leadership, our experience, and our abilities as educational leaders to this vital ground-breaking effort."

I will tell you that our discussions were intense with those principals who asked, "Why change?" or "What's in it for me?" These are principals who have passed a budget, have a cooperative board, a supportive superintendent and a staff who buy into the changes.

However, as we spoke to the principals who have none of these advantages, it became clear that this is about is a change for the greater good, a change that helps to level the playing field. During our meeting on Friday, the Springfield principal pointed out that the old crumpled rug that had puled away from the wall under the bank of old computers right

behind us. She said that it may be surprising to some in the room who don't experience the effects of working in a high poverty school. But, she said that this is the case in Springfield. In retrospect, we could not have picked a better place for our H. 883 discussions on Friday.

In the end, a principal said, we will need to get used to the fact that our jobs and the world around us is changing. Other advantages pointed out by another principal

"From a principal of a K-12 district: I can say that there are many advantages to being a principal in a K-12 system. Curriculum and program articulation, K-12 mission, vision and collaboration, budget alignment, staffing, quality of volunteer board members..."

He goes on to say:

" But most of all the separation between my position and the board is clear and my team is allowed to focus on teaching, learning, and climate. But forget about governance...the reason to do it is for kids, for the unity in program and for the PreK-12 articulation our kids need. This is especially true with CCSS and EQS serving as high leverage drivers to our work."

Dean Stearns, the VPA president and Tech Director of the River Bend Career and Tech Center in Bradford says:

As an organization that "Supports Leaders and Learners" the Vermont Principals Association Executive Council sees this legislation as an opportunity to recruit and retain high quality school leaders. Continuity in school leadership is essential for schools to flourish. Although this is controversial legislation, opposing this legislation would have potentially shut principals out of the conversations that should take place as this process works its way through the legislative process. It is the intent of the VPA to ensure the role of the principal is not diminished in any way, that the critical job that we do, and the authority we need to do that job well, is not stripped away with this new structure.

Dean cites these as positive outcomes that this legislation may bring about:

- **Recruiting and retaining high quality school leaders. As you may know, principal and superintendent turnover is a problem in Vermont. Some research suggests micromanagement by school boards and the complexity of a multi-district system may be contributing factors. It may in fact be a cleaner system, with one board covering multiple schools;**
- **Establishing continuity in school leadership. It is confirmed by Roots of Success that continuity in school leadership is essential for schools too flourish;**
- **Using our facilities flexibly for innovation and revenue (e.g. academies, specialized high schools, preschool programs);**
- **Maintaining healthy and safe education environments through strategic and thoughtful facilities planning. Small school districts struggle to invest appropriately in building maintenance. This results in deferred maintenance that ends up costing more when systems and equipment fail. In addition, it influences the quality of the education**

- environment;
- Reducing accounting and fiscal errors due to the complexity and redundancy of a multi-employer system;
- Creating one large diverse board that will attract competition; with more focus on policy/strategic planning and less emphasis on managing;
- Developing more efficiently develop district-wide enrichment and alternative programs in underutilized space.

Principals are realists, too. In our discussions, we also talked about the challenges of the legislation

- Perceived loss of local control of school decisions;
- The authority of the Superintendent if misused could pose tremendous issues for a school principal
- Let's face it. Like as I experienced in Waterbury and Duxbury, the potential exists for closing of some small schools or changing focus of existing schools;
- We all know that decision making at a higher level doesn't guarantee better decisions, lower spending, a more responsible budget, etc.;
- The instructional leader, the school principal wouldn't be as invested in the budget, as the Superintendent would be

For many reasons, this is a watershed moment in education. It is clear that despite the Brigham decision, Act 60 and 68, and herculean attempts by individual boards, superintendents, principals, teachers and other well-meaning school staff, there still exists huge disparities in educational quality, throughout Vermont. Financing schools has become a yearly struggle that consumes much time, and more importantly is diversionary, sapping our attention away from our kids and the value of education to our society.

This plan excites me because I see possibilities:

- Possibilities that students across Vermont will have more equitable experiences
- Possibilities that students and schools will have greater opportunities
- Possibilities that school leaders can focus on providing quality feedback to teachers so that we can improve instruction
- Possibilities that students will have more choice and options
- Possibilities that we can be more flexibly deploy staff to meet needs of students in schools

What I like:

- When I was a principal, I spent an inordinate amount of time on things I knew very little about and had no training in-septic systems, water testing, air quality, finding head lice on kids, transportation, renting portable classrooms, asbestos training, analyzing lunch programs. You get the idea. I am excited that in this governance plan, I would get to focus on teaching and learning
- 70-100 principals change jobs every year. I am excited about establishing continuity in school leadership. I know, and it is confirmed by Roots of Success that continuity in school leadership is essential for schools flourish

- I know there is a direct connection between a positive school climate and student improvement. I am excited for our leaders to have time to work with their staff on establishing positive climate for learning.
- I am excited about less of the leaders time being spent on the budget. Honestly when I decided to retire from the principalship, it was partially about my conscientious board attempts to entirely focus on cutting spending.
- I an excited about working closely with parents and community members with school councils to define the quality and type of learning experiences at my school.

You may be surprised to know that in 1969, 45 years ago, when our governor was Dean C. Davis and our Commissioner of Education was Dr. Harvey B. Scribner. Some of you may recall that Dr. Scribner went on to be the Commissioner of Education for New York and was a major national education figure. At the time, a little-known document emerged from the Vermont Department of Education called the Vermont Design for Education that had a profound effect on education in Vermont and throughout the country.

In fact, in the late 80's and early 90's, when I was Calais Elementary Principal, I can recall that Alice Blatchley and I would use this document to define our school mission, which we called The Calais Design for Education.

You also may be surprised to hear this from page 24 of that ground-breaking document:

"The Administrative Organization, to utilize most effectively available space, time and talent, must be reorganized. [The K-12 organization](#) is essential for the most efficient utilization of administrative time and talent, for the greatest assurance of articulation in the learning process, from a child's entrance into school through graduation, and for the most economical appropriation of funds for the total educational program."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. As we said in our statement of support:

[We pledge our leadership, our experience, and our abilities as educational leaders to this vital ground-breaking effort.](#)

Submitted by Ken Page, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association on April 1, 2014