

MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS OF THE VSBA
March, 2014
Discussions Regarding the Creation of PreK-12 Education Systems

The VSBA convened six membership meetings during the month of March, 2014. Each was introduced by VSBA Board President Emily Long and VSBA Executive Director Steve Dale.

These were specifically not created as hearings where people come with a hardened position. Rather, we sought to engage our members in a thoughtful conversation.

The sessions were attended by 222 individuals from 99 different district boards and 40 different supervisory unions. Participants were presented with information about the thinking and actions of the VSBA Board and an overview of the key elements of the legislation being considered in the House. At the in-person sessions, this was followed by a discussion facilitated by Paul Costello, Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Paul was brought in by the VSBA to assure that we were able to clearly hear all voices. The webinar format invited participants to share perspectives electronically or by voice.

The conversations were generally thoughtful and reflective and were centered around three major questions:

- A. Given that as an association we have chosen to be engaged in this process, what should be our guiding goals?
- B. Are there particular concerns that should direct our thinking as we advocate around this legislation?
- C. As this bill evolves, are there key elements that we believe are essential to its success?

The content and tenor of the six sessions were varied. Some were quite balanced between those who supported the effort to consider structural changes and those who did not. Some were generally very negative. The Webinar held this past Monday was quite positive. It is safe to say that Vermont's school boards have widely divergent views on this subject.

Below, I have listed four broad viewpoints that we heard expressed and a few specific examples of specific comments made in the conversation. The full list of points made can be found on the VSBA website.

We strongly support the efforts to move forward with a change of this kind in the interests of better meeting the needs of students or as a step toward moderating the increasing costs of education or both.

- Need the ability to provide more options for students within a reasonable budget. One area talked about the inability to support band and sports teams for middle school students in small K-8 schools. Another district spoke of the difficulty in finding a foreign language teacher at only .3 FTE. Another person talked about the option of creating expanded programs such as a regional center for gifted and talented opportunities.
- Need to respond to immediate pressures from voters around just-defeated budgets. Some districts have lost student enrollment, their per student cost has risen dramatically, and they are ready to merge now-- and the current process makes it too complicated.
- We must address the increasing cost of education—over the long run, this is not sustainable. Voters will push back, jeopardizing public education. Are we willing to damage education by cutting programs in order to hold on to the current structure?
- We need an accountable system. We need to elect a school board which is responsible for all children and is able to hold the superintendent accountable for delivering an excellent product. The current system is not accountable with too many decisions being made by an unelected body (the SU Board).
- It is time for an honest analysis of our strengths and weaknesses and our readiness to support the long term health of public education in Vermont. Having a relatively good system now is not a guarantee of excellence in the future. We must be willing to consider changes to be ready for the future.

This is an important discussion, but needs to be handled differently. There must be a way to broadly engage the community in the conversation before passing a bill. We should be more thoughtful about the nature of the process and must value local voice.

- The case has not yet been made. What problem are we trying to solve? Is this the best way to solve it?
- We need more detail. This has not been adequately thought through? What are the unintended consequences?

- This process needs to be built on data. Where is the compelling case for action.
- Can we create a broad community-based planning process to engage people in this process.
- This feels very risky. We will wake up and realize that local control is gone!

These decisions must be made locally through collaboration and public discourse, community by community. A top-down approach does not work. Let local people sort this out. Stay the course with the current Act 153 voluntary approach.

- This feels like the state is taking control and “ramming it through”.
- There should be a more complete process to engage communities. We should grow this kind of change from the ground up, not the top down.
- Communities have had the opportunity to weigh in on this approach during various RED votes and have decided that they don’t like it. Imposing it now seems very undemocratic.
- The rest of the world is moving away from a top-down structure. It is ironic that we are proposing to do that.
- This has the potential to be a huge distraction from the very important work of education!
- It feels like this is a Chittenden County- driven process. The committee doesn’t understand the Northeast Kingdom. In our towns, we don’t have a Y—the school is the community center in town.
- We need good analysis of the problems—what are we trying to accomplish? Then set out to fix the problems. Use a scalpel, not a club.

The legislature should stay out of the delivery of education. Local communities need to grapple with these issues. In the education arena, we must maintain “local control”. And our schools are doing quite well.

- Schools will no longer be “owned” by their communities.

- Relative to other states, our students are doing well. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”
- Local school boards are accountable to the voters. Citizens like having someone local who is the person who is paying attention to education. Trust is very important. There are concerns that voters will cease supporting the school budget if it moves too far from the local community.
- What makes Montpelier think towns are not smart enough to run their own schools?

Added Point:

A theme that arose in most sessions was a concern that Vermont needs to spend time on the root of the problem. We are addressing the consequences of declining student enrollment. As we try to figure out the appropriate response to this immediate problem, there should be equal attention focused on bringing young families into our state through improved economic development.

These meetings were fascinating and informative and provided the opportunity to dispel many misconceptions. They will help inform the VSBA Board as it guides the organization going into the future.