

**House Committees on Education and Ways and Means
Testimony on H.883: Expanded Pre-Kg through Grade 12 School Districts
April 9, 2014**

My Background/Context for Testimony:

- Current: Coordinator, School Leadership Program, Education Department Graduate Program, St. Michael's College; Director, VSA Vermont Leadership Academy
- Forty-year educator
- Served as school superintendent for 20 years (Barre Town, Montpelier, Chittenden South SU)
- Deputy Commissioner of Education
- School administrator in four SU/SD's
- Provided consultative support services to over 20 SU/SD's throughout the state during past decade+

Thank you for the opportunity to share my support for H.883 and for your efforts in considering this important proposed legislation. My want this evening is to focus on elements of the bill I find are essential to improving our schools and the future of our young people as well as the economic future of our state.

These include:

- The increased focus on learning and contemporary instructional practices I firmly believe will result from successful passage of this bill.
- Leadership quality and sustained school leadership will be dramatically enhanced by the passage of H.883.
- School board governance will be more effective in ensuring clarity of vision and purpose for a coordinated Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 system.
- What in my mind is the over-arching issue of our current governance structure – what well-regarded educational researcher Michael Fullan would describe as ***organizational coherence***. Our current status regarding connected practices – be they educational programming or operational management- are largely disjointed and disconnected. How can these kinds of practices lead to coordinated learning opportunities the majority of Vermont's students who maneuver their way through our varied PreKg-12 experiences?

1. Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 school systems governed by a single board and led by a quality superintendent will provide a more sensible and successful

structure for student educational opportunities, student learning, equity and adequacy for all students across the state. The language of H.883 states: ***...across the State, our communities are characterized by sharp inequities in the breadth, depth, and quality of opportunities to learn.***

My experience as a practitioner, school leader, college faculty member, and school consultant leads me to believe strongly that the disparities in the educational opportunities available to Vermont students, in part due to our current widely varied governance structure and related practices, are real and unjust. While the Picus Report of 2012 would indicate we have addressed the taxpayer equity issue following the Brigham decision, we are far from achieving similar equity of experience and adequacy of investment for our students statewide.

2. H.883 states: ***technology and globalization and other societal demands are changing what our students need to know and be able to do in order to contribute to building a strong economic and civic future for the State. These changes place tremendous demands on our schools. Responding to these challenges will require substantial changes in how and what teachers teach, how schools are organized, and what opportunities they provide. In particular, these changes challenge our teachers to rethink the work of teaching to support 21st century skills and challenge our schools to organize in ways that ensure accountability around high expectations for all students, while at the same time enabling sufficient resources and support to allow flexibility and personalization in how we challenge students to meet those high expectations. A growing body of research suggests that systematic improvement of learning requires a systems level approach that provides teachers with the professional support and high quality information they need to customize learning effectively.***

If we are truly invested in improving and expanding the educational experiences of our students and better meeting their needs, we need to focus our energy and attention on the instructional design and practices for learning. Our current system has some excellent work being done across the state in this arena, but with great fragility – dependent on our finance system, continuous change among school leaders and school board members and a multitude of state and federally legislated mandates that become overwhelming to practitioners, mismanaged at state and local levels, lack coherence and meaningful accountability. Our focus needs to address student personal and academic growth absent the current degree of distractions generated by a poorly designed governance structure

3. H.883 states: ***Many areas of the State face a profound leadership challenge ...we see increasing proportions of our educational leaders' time—particularly in our smallest districts—consumed by administrative tasks.***

We have seen successful coordination of operational services in supervisory unions across the state. In some cases, these arrangements are fragile due to statutory language, board/administrative turnover, local vendor issues, etc.

My experience in Chittenden South is we not only saved money by consolidating practices, we were enormously more effective in providing sound management, information and services to member school districts by creating these types of coordinated services. However, the time dedicated to convince, cajole, educate local boards of the benefits is very time consuming, takes away focus time on educational leadership, and often leads to outcomes reflecting something less than “all in” and, subsequently, the required management of multiple systems (transportation; food services; facility management; human resources).

From my past five years affiliated with higher education and specific to leadership development, many of our best and brightest choose to avoid important leadership roles because of concern with the ambiguity of roles and responsibilities and the sense that they assume a role that distances them from educational leadership versus operational and political management. These are also key reasons for the high rate of leadership turnover.

4. H.883 states: ***We believe that the current structure, with its substantial inequities, multiple small governing units, and conflicting lines of authority, makes it too difficult for our schools to work together coherently to support our ambitious goals for our students.***

My perspective on this is a simple one: we have 34 7/9-12th grade union high school districts governed by regional but locally elected school board members who make decisions regularly that impact the experiences of students representing multiple communities. Is it not reasonable to believe that these same types of community minded citizens cannot make these same types of well informed decisions for a Pre-Kindergarten – Grade 12 educational systems? I observed the CVU School Board provide outstanding governance to its 9-12 population of students representing four (five when considering St. George) communities. A PreKg- Grade 12 school board lends itself to a more coherent and more coordinated program.

I have worked with two larger Vermont supervisory unions who invested a good amount of money, time and energy to the notion of a consolidated school system. While committee members largely agreed a consolidation made great sense for establishing a coherent, more accountable and more focused school system, in the end, nothing changed because of community concern that there would be a loss of local control, there was no tangible evidence of the benefits relative to student learning and costs were not dramatically being reduced.

In my view, student learning opportunities and outcomes will improve, if in fact the Vermont Legislature chooses to create a PreKg-Grade 12 governance structure. I also believe there will be there will be a new found perception that the investment is education is generating the return we all want with our schools – successful graduates.

This conversation on school governance has gone on for many years during my 40 years of service. Now is the time to move forward in re-creating a structure that will further the educational outcomes, improve the efficiencies of our operations and our spending and create a public school system for all of our learners that is simply more coherent and more successful in its practices.

Over 20 years ago, a board member shared with me that “changing public school seemed harder than changing the Catholic Church.” It has taken great courage, clarity of vision and purpose and a belief in accountable, compassionate, ethical and competent leadership by Pope Francis I to begin this process of change. Moving forward with this legislation will undoubtedly require courage on the part of all of you. Recognizing and communicating to Vermonters the importance of addressing a change in our education governance structure in order to better serve all of Vermont’s children in a manner that truly reflects a focus on equity and adequacy of opportunity is imperative. Knowing many of individuals and organizations that have spoken in favor of this legislation, I know you realize you have folks in the field who have the passion and competence to implement this change in the governance structure in a manner that benefits all Vermonters.

Respectfully Submitted,
Brian. C. O’Regan Ed.D.
boregan@smcvt.edu
233-8813