

House Education Committee Testimony - 3/18/14

I am Kim Gleason, VSBA board officer and seven year “veteran” of the Essex Town School Board. From my experience in both roles and as a mother of four children being educated in our public schools, I welcome the opportunity to testify today to share thoughts and perspective regarding the structural changes to education governance being considered in this committee and throughout the state.

It is heartening to know that behind all this effort is genuine commitment to improving opportunities and outcome for all kids. I view this conversation as a natural outgrowth of the Agenda for a World Class Education which was the joint work of the VSBA and VSA intended to move education forward. By many national measures, Vermont education consistently ranks at or near the top. This is and should be a point of pride in the good work that is happening for kids. Education is also one of our State’s greatest assets in bringing jobs and families to Vermont. It is in fact why we moved here from New York City nearly seventeen years ago to grow and raise our family. And Vermont, like any organization, needs to look at our greatest assets and evaluate how we can improve upon them and effectively and efficiently invest in continuous improvement. The world should know Vermont for its maple syrup, skiing and education!

To that end, we have outlined in the Agenda for a World Class Education, some key tenets. It is time to ensure that our Educational System is structured in a way that it can, **by design**, not happenstance, deliver the following:

- Assure Success for Every Student
- Support a New Vision for Teaching and Learning
- Engage and Support Families and Communities
- Use the resources available through World-Class Technology
- Provide Effective Leadership

I have been encouraged to hear Secretary Holcombe’s call for a common set of indicators to consistently measure outcomes for kids among schools. This is more than just NECAP scores and this data can help to identify pockets of excellence and inform shared best practice to help improve outcomes for all kids, while evaluating cost effectiveness. Harnessing this data is critical to ensuring that whatever change takes place is informed by data and accountability has consistent measures. The Agency of Education must be properly resourced to develop and manage this accountability system.

The structure of education governance must clearly define outcomes, roles and responsibilities. In my opinion, it is the role of a school board to establish policy that reflects the values of the community around education and what the desired outcomes are for kids, to assure that the school district has the resources to support those outcomes and to do so at an investment level that their community can afford. And perhaps most importantly, it is the board’s role to provide transparency and accountability to those outcomes.

It is not reasonable to expect that a lay board should be making decisions on the day-to-day operations of the school house, though that is happening in some districts. This should be the responsibility of the Superintendent, his or her leadership team, and the educational experts and teachers in the buildings. Board members/parents/community members are not necessarily (or by job requirement) the experts on matters of curriculum or pedagogy, but are often the experts on their children and the experience that their children/grandchildren are having. That is where their voice can be very valuable in helping the school houses reflect

the culture of their local community, and provide a feedback loop to the district on the effects of the efforts of the education experts, teachers, principals, superintendent, etc. This increased school voice (i.e. parent advisory councils, or something to that effect) could inform building leadership and school climate, and provide an avenue for greater understanding among the parent community of the work of 21st century educators and learners. I do believe that communities that may feel as though they are giving up their "local control" need to be able to envision a model that continues to give them voice. Clarity of roles and responsibilities in any new governance structure must speak to this issue.

In a pre-K through 12 education system, we need to be able to look across the full spectrum of a student's public school experience to appreciate their growth and help them achieve at their highest potential in a way that is meaningful and relevant for each learner. We need to know that the transition is seamless for the student as their goals are being pursued and redefined with each new learning opportunity. This is demanded in the personal learning plans and will be challenged in a structure that doesn't hold leaders and educators accountable to that progression from pre-K through their high school graduation, preparing each student for all that lies beyond in career or college. We can no longer accept that working in our silos and passing students along as the next school's responsibility or questioning the efforts of the previous school is the best that we can do for kids. If boards are able to hold one person, the superintendent, responsible for the whole journey and optimizing each student's experience, he or she will be empowered and responsible for ensuring that will happen in the school house. In turn, boards will be empowered and responsible for holding the superintendent accountable to showing us that our kids have made it. The student will be at the center of the planning and the educators will be the team charged with supporting them on their journey.

In listening to our colleagues throughout the state, I could envision a pre-K through 12 district improving:

- Curriculum Alignment
- Teacher Development
- Student and parent transition to high school (perhaps stronger middle level programming)
- High school transition for students with exceptional needs
- Opportunities to share/distribute resources more equitably
- Student academic enrichment
- Ability to maintain optimum class sizes
- Ability to transfer personnel based on student needs
- Efficiency with bus routing system and school schedules
- Opportunities for cross-age student mentoring/tutoring
- Board governance with a focus on PK-12 success
- More robust and accessible student data system allowing for improved performance monitoring
- Leadership effectiveness with a focus on PK-12 success

Working in isolation, people don't know what we don't know. Recently, I had the opportunity to interview the principal from an Essex Junction elementary school. This was part of the effort of our Education and Community Engagement volunteer committee of The Heart and Soul working collaboratively in Essex Town and Essex Junction. We were taking an inventory of the community engagement activities currently happening in each school. In the course of conversation with that principal, I learned of an emergent reader program that is

being offer in the Junction school and the model they use to train and pair volunteers with teachers for the year. I was thrilled to learn of this program, since one of our other committee members is a retired literacy professor grandmother who is very interested in leading the charge to organize a similar effort in Essex Elementary School. There are many rich programs happening in each of our schools throughout Essex town and Junction and this committee work is a collaborative effort of both districts and the community to share our best practice around engagement in our schools. This strikes me as the type of sharing that I would expect to be happening **by design** in a pre-K through 12 system.

This issue is not about cost, but is about opportunity. Deploying resources in the most efficient and effective manner for kids is key. Out of control budgets, declining enrollments and small class sizes are not our story in Essex. Our average annual budget increase for the last five years has been 1.6%. We have a stable enrollment of more than 1200 students and class sizes ranging from 22-24 in grades 4-8 and 18 in our K classes. We have had to alter our foreign language program, initially due to the challenge in hiring a fractional position. I could not imagine managing our special education budget without considerations for the multi-tiered system of support in the classroom designed to support kids not “labeled” as special ed. This is a huge portion of any budget and subject to the change in the level of needs of the fluid population of students receiving special education. As classes graduate from building to building in our district, we are able to shift teachers as necessary to meet the needs of our students. We have robust music programs and extracurricular activities in our schools. In all of these areas, when our superintendent is building the budget our board is asking how the funds requested will support our strategic plan and the achievement of outcomes for kids, and throughout the year we are asking for evidence.

In pursuit of improved opportunities and outcomes for all Vermont kids, I implore you to resist the temptation for maps and mandates, and instead define the outcomes that you are seeking for students and offer evidence and models that support achievement of those outcomes. Once you have done that, please demand that all stakeholders, parents, community members, educators and leaders accept the challenge to create the structure that will best assure accountability to those outcomes. If the focus is on the student and we are expecting many aspects of education to change to be able to prepare students for the next stage of their lives, we need to consider the possibility that our current structures may need to change as well in order to optimize our students’ opportunity for success. Today, if we stand still, we are left behind. That is not an option for our kids!

Thank you for your commitment to this work on behalf of all Vermont learners.