

**Testimony Regarding the Creation of  
Pre-K to 12 Education Systems  
Steve Dale, Executive Director, VSBA  
March 18, 2014**

I first spoke to you on Valentine's Day and gave you a broad overview of the perspective of the Vermont School Boards Association board of directors relative to the work you are doing on moving to PreK-12 Education Systems. Over the past month, you have done a great deal of work on the bill. We have worked hard to develop ideas to strengthen your efforts and have also been engaging with our membership.

Over the period March 10 through March 20, we will hold five membership meetings. Thus far, we have completed three of those meetings which have included about 90 board members in total. We have another meeting in Chester tonight and in Lyndon tomorrow. We will do a webinar on Monday evening. If you still are working on the bill, I would like to leave open the chance to come back and speak with you further after we complete these sessions. What we are learning informs my testimony here and will inform us at subsequent committees in the House and the Senate.

There are three things I would like to do this morning.

First, I want to restate the official position of the VSBA Board.

Second, I want to share with you some broad perspectives from our membership meetings thus far.

Finally, I have some recommendations related to the specifics of the bill.

**1. Official position of the VSBA Board**

Our board spent time discussing the four compelling reasons for action.

Expanded opportunity. Equal opportunity. Personalization.

Bending the cost increase curve and creating less volatility for taxpayers

Attracting and retaining leadership

Increasing accountability

The VSBA board agreed a month ago to the idea of moving in the general direction of PreK-12 Education Systems and away from Supervisory Unions. We also agreed to engage with you in developing the legislation. Our board has not approved any particular language, so I am not here to give our unqualified endorsement of the draft bill that you are working with. However, I will reiterate our broad statements.

Key to our board discussion was the following:

- The status quo is not going to serve us well. Changes in expectations of schools, the demographics of our state, and the cost structure will make it more and more difficult to operate high quality public education in 300 separate units and a number of supervisory unions. Our passion must be focused on students and on personalized 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Somewhat larger pre-K – 12 districts, still recognizing a Vermont scale, will likely serve us better.
- The process needs to allow the time and support for local boards to reasonably figure this out and for the whole process to be administered well.
- Any plan must allow expanded districts to create formal vehicles to maintain strong local ties between schools and communities, protect against unwanted school closures, and assure strong representation from each town on any new governing body.
- We understand that there are many complexities, especially surrounding choice towns, which must be sorted out before some parts of the state can even begin this discussion. It is our intention that historic choice options be able to be protected.

## **2. Perspectives from the VSBA Membership Meetings, thus far.**

We represent most school boards in Vermont. As you can gather, there are a wide range of views on this proposal from within the ranks of current and recently departed board members. Some are very enthusiastic about your proposal. Some are strongly and absolutely opposed.

We have now conducted three meetings of our membership, with another tonight and another tomorrow night. Thus far, each has been different. It has also been clear that entire boards are viewing this differently from other boards—it is not just a case of individual opinions. It exemplifies the wide differences between districts. Below is a summary of opinions and issues raised during this meetings.

We have members who are strongly enthusiastic about moving forward with this effort. Their reasons range from:

Necessity—they have small districts/small schools, their taxpayers are in revolt, and they need to be more nimble in their response and in their ability to reconfigure schools and staff.

Dissatisfaction with what they can offer their students for a reasonable price.  
Belief that the system is incredibly inefficient.  
Serious concerns about financial sustainability.  
Frustration in being able to attract board members and strong education leaders.  
The immediate inability to recruit school board candidates.

We have members who are adamantly opposed: Their reasons range from:

A belief that this is a serious assault on democracy and undermines local voice.  
They believe the process is heavy-handed, top-down, and promotes a one-size-fits-all approach.  
The plan will weaken the current strong ties between communities and their schools and will increase the likelihood that budgets will be defeated.  
A belief that the quality of education will be weakened if there are not local citizens paying attention to the local school and having control over budget priorities.  
A belief that the intent is to eliminate small schools.

We heard from a number of people concern about undertaking this process because it can be a big distraction from many very important endeavors focused on students and teachers.

A number of people—both those supportive and those opposed—believe that the case has not yet been made compellingly—that the outcomes are not clear nor are the means by which we will assess our progress. We all need to keep working on this issue. We strongly support a focus by the AOE on the broad assessment of our schools so that we are actually able to better assess “equal opportunity”.

We, as an association, continue to support the direction of this bill, but have not been in a position to vote in some formal way on the language. However, in the effort to create a bill that is true to our principles and has a reasonable chance for success, I offer the following:

### **3. Key suggestions for the bill—version 5.1**

#### ***Set a minimum number of districts at 45-55.***

We suggest this with some trepidation—we had wanted to steer clear of numbers, but my membership is clear—this can’t be about “big”-- it still has to be close to each community. An expected range needs to be clarified so that we have a more common understanding of the “end state”. I have been in several meetings where people say—“This is the proposal to go to

10 districts” or 20 districts or 30 districts. We have to be clear that this is about moving to “slightly larger” districts, or, as Superintendent Dan French recently put it, is about moving from “micro” to “small”

***Be sure to give time to local boards/communities to develop their new plan.***

That is central to this plan and is very important to local boards. The original discussion was around giving local communities a deadline in 2017 to take local action—that is three years from date of passage—more like two years from the time a number of technical questions get answered in the Spring of 2015.

In the last draft I saw, you are expecting preliminary applications in July 2015—that is not three years—that is one year—or potentially two months if you make any adjustments next year. That is hardly time to get guidance from the technical team. And the big task here is relational—boards and communities need the time to build trust. It takes time for people to figure this stuff out.

Allow applications immediately, and encourage people to move quickly. And perhaps further incentivize early districts. But don’t discourage local process, and don’t set yourselves up for a statewide glut of action that creates “centralized chaos”. This is a very fast timeframe for people all over Vermont to be undertaking a process. It will require capacity at the Agency of Education from day one. Legal and technical questions have to be able to be answered. Applications have to be processed. Data has to be able to be crunched.

If there is any question on these issues, provide more time, not less.

**Be crystal clear that during the voluntary phase, new districts can create articles of agreement that cover a broad array of issues:**

- Make- up of board (within legal guidelines)—size, numbers, balance of town representation
- Choice or no choice for students in the district (within the legal guidelines)
- Voting protections to prevent unwanted school closures
- Nature of voting (Australian ballot, Voting from the floor at multiple town meetings, etc.)
- Ownership of school buildings
- Transition of other public services currently handled by the school district

The handling of long-term debt

The make-up of school-based community councils and the process by which they are selected.

**Be sure the Legal and Fiscal Working Group is able to perform its tasks and provide guidance, but do not give an unaccountable group ultimate authority to make final decisions.**

We would suggest that the group be selected by the Agency from people with relevant fiscal and legal expertise. Their work should *inform* district work and any rule-making being done by the State Board and a decision on whether any technical adjustments need to be made to the bill next year. However, they should not get to change fundamental policy issues unilaterally. (There is some implication of that possibility). For example, if the group was to say that they don't think a district can protect against school closure, that could be a problem, since many boards will be entering into this process with that assumption. We can't have a work group establishing policy without public process.

**Be sure the Design Team can perform its duties in concert with communities.**

Since the beginning of this process, we have had concern about a highly politicized "design team" that will be recommending final boundary changes. Although they will be charged with finalizing a proposed plan for assignment of districts, they need good public process and will need to work with individual districts around the realities of those areas. This requires a strong knowledge base, but also great sensitivity to local process, and to the variations in history, culture, and geography throughout Vermont and an ability to listen. In other words, highly political people who are great for some tasks, may not be the best for what will be a sensitive, thoughtful process. This will all be about execution. Our thought is that this may best be appointed by the Secretary. The key will be the leader. And they will need strong staff support.

**Don't foreclose current efforts.**

Leave in place everything under Act 153/156. You can make clear in this bill that only proposals approved through this process will be considered acceptable for an "Expanded District". But don't stop current efforts. You heard it last night—from Underhill and from MMU. They are in the midst of doing a Modified Unified Union District. Huntington has already been quite clear that, at this point, it is not inclined to join such a discussion. Underhill is desperate for action. Under your plan, that would not be possible. They may have to wait until 2020! If they go ahead with the Modified Union, they would be 98% done with a new

district. Ultimately, Huntington would need to decide whether to join in with their elementary school or to try to connect elsewhere, but meanwhile, the work continues for everyone else.

**Properly resource this whole effort.**

Education is one of the largest systems of public services in our state and our country. I won't mention the other. Adjusting education governance in the ways contemplated is a huge undertaking. Don't underestimate the level of activity that is being required over a limited period of time.

Be sure the Agency has sufficient staff to carry the load—

- Technical questions

- Legal questions

- Financial analysis

- Student demographic analysis

- Support for the work of the Design Team (assumed to be a monthly, high-level group)

- Support for the Legal/Technical Team

- Application processing

Be sure the State Board has sufficient staff support to process applications and to process the rules.

- Policy analysis

- Administrative support

Don't underestimate local costs of the many transitions-- collective bargaining, technology systems, student data systems, accounting systems, office space changes, etc. The Two-Rivers experience would be instructive. The \$150,000 in transition costs for their effort was not excessive. The \$50,000 figure mentioned yesterday may be conservative.

Promote an honest conversation within the General Assembly and the Administration regarding the resources needed to do this right.

The committee may want to consider implementation of this effort so that there are groupings of districts being done within various time periods.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify. We will continue to offer additional ideas and perspective as this very important measure continues to be considered here at the statehouse.