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February 14, 2014

Dear Senators of the Vermont Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my opinion on **S.175**, “an act relating to permitting a student to remain enrolled in a Vermont public school after moving to a new school district,” which I learned about as a member of the Vermont Principals’ Association Legislative Committee. My perspective on this bill comes from my ten years as a teacher and six years as a principal, currently at Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School.

I strongly oppose this act for the following reasons:

One, this bill further expands school choice and **undermines Vermont’s commitment to ALL its public schools**. S.175 is evidence that the national trend of stratifying students by socioeconomic status is encroaching upon Vermont. Despite its stated intent, if passed, it will take just a couple of years for the true consequence of S.175 to appear: the increased segregation of Vermont schools by wealth and poverty.

Two, **since no transportation is associated with this bill, only students who have parents willing to transport them daily or who have the means to purchase their own vehicles would benefit**. Low-income or otherwise struggling families moving to a new town will understandably rely on the transportation of the local school; they have no increased choice. Yet after a more affluent or educationally-savvy family moves in, they will stay attached to their previous school. Currently, when a family moves, they join and contribute to public life and education in their new community. The mixture of children from middle-income and lower-income families raises learning expectations, expands creative learning activities, and boosts levels of achievement. This is an essential factor in Vermont’s high educational ranking in the US. Sending students to their new local schools is critical to cement this new relationship. **Without this connection, new residents sending their children out of town would have no reason to support their local school budget or make other investments in the local children’s learning or wellbeing**. This is how S.175 will hurt vulnerable communities: the poor kids move into the schools; the affluent don’t.

Three, **local school districts and supervisory unions can be trusted to make their own arrangements**. The expanded school choice regulations already allow greater flexibility. Legally speaking, there is no need for S.175. That’s why this bill is so suspicious. It’s a voucher system, where the money follows the student and deprives the local school of its rightful funding source: students who live in the community it serves.

Four, I understand that the Senate Education Committee has heard compelling testimony in

favor of allowing students to remain at their schools after moving to other districts. **These emotional anecdotes do not make good statewide legislation.** Personal stories are great for school-to-school negotiations regarding school choice; no money needs to change hands, and guidelines are already in place for special education. Make no mistake, if helping these kids really mattered to parents and school leaders, then they wouldn't care about the money. They would just do the right thing, kid by kid, as they already can and do. Let's not pretend; S.175 a voucher program packaged in sob stories to bring more school choice that leaves poor, struggling, and special needs students behind.

There are already plenty of parents who pay tuition and transport their children to private schools. In Windham County, Leland and Gray competes with many of these. **It's not students who are struggling, or have special needs, or are traumatized who go to private school. These students are staying and growing in number and percentage even as the overall public school population declines – Vermont's equivalent of White Flight.** Don't delude yourselves. S.175 is voucher bill to serve one purpose only, a purpose that betrays the great American equalizer, our public education system, where students and teachers of all backgrounds learn and grow together.

Why does the legislature continue to pass bills that give privileged parents what they want instead of giving all kids what they need? Where is the legislation for the exploding mental health and drug addiction crisis among our youth? And among their parents and relatives? This state is in crisis, and our public schools are the emergency services. Each year my administrative and counseling staff are hit by a rising flood of kids in crisis. At a moment's notice, our crisis team manages the crisis of the week, or the day, or how about three kids in crisis in one day – one a suicidal ideation, one a homicidal ideation, and one an impaired, emotionally disabled student whose trauma she can no longer contain. My measure of success as a principal is not disturbing one classroom while keeping tight relationships around these struggling, depressed, or addicted 12- to 20-year-olds.

Vermont schools need social workers. We drug treatment programs accessible from school. We need therapists counseling groups and individuals right here. Every day busses bring the students to us because they are sick of being at home and hope for something more in their lives. They want help and they trust their schools to give it to them. This is what the legislature needs to work on. What the heck is *The Hungry Heart* about? A boy is homeless. A girl overdoses on Suboxone, the drug manufactured to treat prescription drug addiction. These are our kids and our resources are overextended. We have compassion-fatigue. We have frustrated teachers who want students to be well and ready to learn. Vermont schools need job-training programs that pay kids to learn trades and bridge them to higher education, both of which are increasingly out of reach. This is where we need your help.

You've heard emotional testimony in support of S.175. There's plenty to go around. You want to help kids? **Expand DCF and NFI and mental health agencies and drug treatment programs now being crushed under the weight of needs like we've never endured.** My son graduated Peoples Academy in 2010. Four of his school-friends have

died by their own hands. Two killed themselves while he was still in high school, and two ended their lives since he graduated. What kind of world is this? Why is my son now carrying their souls? Who was there to help him, to help their families, to help Morrisville? There are suicides all over this state; each one requires many months and unbudgeted resources for the school to recover. Have you looked at the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey? I'm begging you to help us. You're wasting your time with S.175. **Talk about real problems and pass legislation that supplies real solutions, with real professionals who can help turn around our students' lives.** We've endured seven years of recession, more recently called the "jobless recovery." What will Vermont's seven-year-olds look like when they turn up in 7th grade?

Next door to Leland and Gray is a dentist, who has opened his practice to my students once a month, kids who otherwise don't get dental care. I don't know how to pay for it. Here is a solution in my community for which there is no funding. What is the legislature doing about helping children living in poverty? **S.175 will concentrate that poverty, quickly and surely, town by town. Have towns, have-not towns, just like so much of America.** Where do you think good Vermont teachers, principals, and superintendents will want to work? Or want to live and raise their children?

Thank you for considering my perspective on this bill and my suggestions for the priorities of the Vermont State Senate. Increased school choice continues to have a steadily devastating impact on public education. Our schools are the lifeblood of our communities, bringing different people together in the common democratic aim of educating the next generations, who will eventually take care of our nation and of us. **Abandon your discussion on S.175 and find out the real problems Vermont schools need our leaders to solve.**