



Vermont Independent
Schools Association

2014 Legislative Priorities & Concerns

The Role of Public & Independent Schools

Discussion of the role of public and independent schools has become more controversial due principally to Education Secretary Armando Vilaseca's Act 56 study committee report to the legislature. ***VISA holds that the Secretary neglected his duty to the committee members and his responsibility to fulfill the legislative directive for the committee's work.***

Vilaseca's exceptionally one-sided and unfair report does nothing useful in advancing an important discussion. By concentrating largely on independent schools and on issues not included in the committee's statutory charge the report directs attention away from other very important considerations: Why did two districts become so unhappy with the public system that they took the difficult and extreme step of leaving it? And, why did the state and the local supervisory unions not adopt a more supportive and constructive attitude in their efforts to keep the districts in the public system?

Meanwhile, a series of debates is now in progress between individuals associated with the Public Assets Institute and the Ethan Allen Institute concerning the relationship of public and independent schools and school choice in Vermont. VISA has no connection to these events. ***VISA suggests these debates are not helpful at this time, because they draw attention away from the issues raised by the Winhall and North Bennington situations.***

Support for Local Control & School Choice

Governor Shumlin has explicitly stated his support for local control of education in North Bennington and elsewhere. ***While VISA does not represent dissident school districts, the association strongly supports local control and school choice in a money-follows-the-student model.***

Consolidation of supervisory unions, school districts and public schools is likely to be a contentious topic in the 2014 legislative session. Consolidation creates implications for local control and school choice opportunities. ***VISA recommends that local control and school choice be protected.***

Assisting & Expanding Special Education in Independent Schools

Some legislators have expressed interest in expanding opportunities for special education in independent schools, particularly with respect to S.91 now on the wall in the Senate Education Committee. ***VISA favors expanding special education opportunity in ways that do not create unneeded capacity in a time of declining school enrollments and which minimize the administrative burden on schools adding services and which encourage better cooperation from supervisory unions.***

VISA recommends incentives and reduced regulatory requirements to support schools seeking initial special education approvals. ***VISA also recommends development of best-practice guidelines for Supervisory Unions to work with independent schools, particularly in sharing resources and in provision of IDEA Part B services.***

Meanwhile however, the Education Agency recently raised barriers to the required approval of special education rates at all independent schools now approved to provide special education. This is an unhelpful disincentive for the independent schools to continue with current services. Since issuing a directive in October, the Education Agency has refused VISA's requests for a meeting of affected schools and agency officials to discuss the changes and their implications. ***VISA regards these refusals as unacceptable and requests that the administration or legislature correct these counterproductive policies.***

Changes to Dual Enrollment Legislation

The 2013 Legislature adopted changes to the dual enrollment statute – 16 VSA 944 – that allows high school students to take college-level courses from college instructors and receive credit toward both high school and college graduation. The legislation allowed students attending independent schools to participate in the program if the student was receiving public tuition support, but the legislation excluded Vermont resident students attending independent schools on a private pay basis. This exclusion has barred students – principally students attending several Vermont religious schools – from continuing in the dual enrollment program.

VISA recommends a simple change to 16 VSA 944 (b) (1) (A) (i) (II), removing the words “to which the student’s district of residence pays publicly funded tuition on behalf of the student.”

This change will enable approximately 20 students attending Rice Memorial High School, Mount St Joseph High School, Grace Christian School, Mid Vermont Christian School, Vermont Commons School and Avalon Triumvirate Academy to resume participation in the dual enrollment program.

Changes to Average Announced Tuition

Districts sending students to independent schools must pay at least the statewide average announced tuition, if no other arrangements apply. Several schools' announced tuitions are not created in a transparent and fair manner, becoming unfair inputs to the statewide average computation. ***VISA recommends reforms to the system, basing the tuition floor on verifiable data.***

Support for Property Tax Exemption

Non-profit organizations, including independent schools, are exempt from the property tax. A legislative study committee has considered proposals to tax non-profits or to require payments in lieu of taxes. ***VISA recommends that elementary and secondary independent school education be considered a public good that should not be taxed or otherwise subjected to payment in lieu of taxes statutes.***

