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To: The House Education Committee
From: Nicole L. Mace, Executive Director, Vermont School Boards Association
Re: Act 46 Implementation Update
Date: November 18, 2015

Over the past several years the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) has been engaged in a serious dialogue with our members regarding the best public policy approaches to address declining enrollment, rising costs, increasing numbers of students with significant learning needs, leadership turnover, and growing inequity in student opportunity. These challenges provided the impetus for Act 46, the most significant piece of education legislation affecting school boards in over a century.

Since the passage of Act 46, the VSBA has met with school board members from almost every supervisory union in the state. While there is not universal support among our members for the types of changes contemplated by Act 46, I can say with confidence that Vermont's school board members are rising to meet the challenges facing our systems, and are charting a positive course forward for public education in Vermont.

Board members are taking Act 46 seriously and are in the process of understanding what options are available to them under the law and engaging their communities in that conversation. By and large, the more information board members receive about the law and the flexibility that is built into it, the more positive they become about how they can make it work for students and their communities.

Last month, the VSBA concluded seven regional meetings attended by over 300 board members across the state. We hold these meetings on an annual basis in order to provide our members with an opportunity to come together to learn about important education issues.

The VSBA's 2015 Regional Meetings were designed to provide board members with an opportunity to better understand the governance provisions of Act 46, to share information and perspectives with each other, and to hear from the Secretary of Education regarding the Agency's Education Quality Review process. The following general themes emerged through those discussions:

1. School districts are hard at work on Act 46, whether through an organized 16 VSA 706 study committee or through a subcommittee of the SU board or through informal community dialogue.
2. We benefited greatly from having Secretary Holcombe join us at all seven regional meetings to describe the Agency's efforts to measure equity and quality through the Education Quality Review process. The Secretary's presentation made much clearer to board members how they might start evaluating their own ability to meet the first two goals of Section 2 of Act 46 – equity and quality. When it comes to the other Section 2 goals, they are not always easy to translate into a plan of action – what does it mean to be accountable? Transparent? How do boards know whether they have designed systems to “maximize” efficiencies? How do they know that they have achieved a cost that taxpayers value? Additional guidance from the State Board on how they will be evaluating whether a plan addresses these goals will be very helpful.
3. There are certain regions of the state where the blend of governance structures makes the solutions less apparent. These regions need additional support and guidance on how to meet both the letter and the spirit of the law.
4. Boards need guidance/clarity regarding eligibility for small schools grants beyond 2019 – how will the State Board determine geographic isolation, educational excellence and efficiencies? Sec 21 of Act 46 requires the State Board to publish those guidelines prior to July 1, 2018. We have urged the Board to consider publishing those guidelines in 2016 so that boards and communities have greater clarity regarding their eligibility for those grants as they consider their options under the law.
5. Boards are focused on honoring local values. Recognizing that Act 46 calls on all of us to make changes to historical governing and operating patterns, boards are placing great emphasis on designing systems that are more responsive to the needs of students and taxpayers, while at the same time preserving what matters most to the communities they serve.

As board members lead challenging conversations within their communities, it is critical we are all providing consistent messages and supporting each other. We have been fortunate to have a close working relationship with all partners, including

the General Assembly, the State Board of Education and the Agency of Education - and look forward to continuing to do so as we navigate this dynamic landscape. Please let me know if you have any questions or would like me to provide additional information about the perspectives we are hearing from our members.