

Major Education Issues
February 4, 2014 Testimony
Stephen Dale, Executive Director
Vermont School Boards Association

The Vermont School Boards Association and the Vermont Superintendents Association are presenting together today. We have spent a great deal of time sorting through the issues and approaches and have come together on a basic framework for you to consider as you fashion a bill. In the world of municipal government, there is the League of Cities and Towns that represents elected officials as well as city managers and town managers. Our two associations represent different groups, but similar to VLCT, we need to be able to come together to provide guidance for state officials. We promote the idea that the superintendent and the board are a team with a joint obligation to assure that Vermont students get an excellent education at a price taxpayers can afford. If we can't agree on general direction, how do we expect you to be able to sort through the countless proposals that are coming to you from every direction.

The VSBA speaks organizationally through our resolutions and through actions of our board. As I speak today, it is critical that you all understand that we have 1450 individuals serving on over 300 boards. I can tell you that there are a wide range of views on this whole subject. There are some who are enthusiastic supporters of creative action and there are others who will adamantly oppose whatever you do. I need to reflect that range of perspectives. As you proceed with a specific bill, you will continue to hear a range of views from our members.

But we are here today because our organization and its leadership believe that school boards must be part of the solution. We cannot simply say, "leave us alone". Education in Vermont is a joint endeavor with you all setting policy and providing the financing framework and with local boards assuring that great education is delivered locally at a reasonable cost to taxpayers. It is critical that a legislative committee not sit in this building and come up with a solution, but that your work be heavily informed by local people who care very deeply about Vermont and know a lot about how this all works on the ground.

The VSBA is committed to two major objectives. I shared information about both during the first week of the session. First, we believe you need to do something specific and targeted about property tax rates this year—both through addressing costs and reducing the state-level demands on the education fund. It is important that you send a message before town meeting. I have another summary of those recommendations and would be glad to return with some of my board to talk further with you about those very important issues.

The second is the area that we came here today to talk about—the longer-term view of public education equity, quality, and cost.

Our format today is that Jeff and I will both provide some introductory perspectives and then Nicole will review the specific proposals. We will then, together be glad to enter into a discussion with the committee and answer questions.

I want to start with three basic premises:

1. Vermont is blessed with people who care deeply about education. Our system is better than most by most indicators. We, as a people, support our system very generously. We have many excellent teachers and administrators and many, many dedicated citizens serving as school board members. In many ways, we enter this discussion from a position of strength, not from a position of crisis. We enter this discussion because we believe profoundly in public education and want it to be strong and effective on into the future as we experience many changes in our society and our demographics.

2. Vermont is a special place. We love our small and intimate communities. We operate on a scale that respects the dignity of each individual. Our government is accessible and responsive, both locally and on the state level. Vermonters feel connected to their public institutions—particularly their schools. The group that came in last week, several of whom are local school board members, did a great job of reflecting those values. We must be sure that our solutions have fundamental respect for those values, recognizing that there are many ways to reflect that respect.

3. We must be honest about our challenges and be willing to address them. You have seen the data. You know the problems. We have growing disparity in what we are able to provide for our students from region to region. We are under increasing pressure from state and federal mandates. We have higher expectations than ever of our schools to engage every child in a personalized PreK-12 education. And our students bring to school increasing challenges which require more extensive supports and more substantial interventions. The ability to respond to these pressures effectively and efficiently has been seriously affected by the relentless drop in the number of children in Vermont and by our inability to fundamentally alter our system in response. Our citizens are telling us that our cost per-student trend line needs to change. Board members, this past fall, in six meetings held around the state told us that to respond to this situation, we must be better able to deploy staff nimbly and must be able to achieve somewhat greater scale. There is substantial openness to change if done correctly.

Given these truths, I want to share some key principles that must guide our longer-term solutions—

- ***Solutions must address concerns about equity, efficiency and quality.*** Whatever strategy we employ will need to make a difference. This can't be about talking about the problem—the strategy needs to be likely to make a difference. We like the secretary's focus on measuring outcomes, providing data to boards and citizens, and allowing for intervention where performance and/or costs are a significant issue.
- ***Solutions must allow districts to more flexibly deploy resources.*** Two major themes came forth from the VSBA regional meetings in the fall. In answering the question of how to address equity and cost, the answer overwhelming was-- the ability to more flexibly deploy resources and achieving scale to get efficiencies.
- ***Solutions should not assume one size fits all***—The reality of Vermont's districts and the variety of choice configurations makes a simple solution impossible, unless this body wants to take on the choice issue. We must allow districts/regions to design their approach, assuming they meet basic statewide requirements. All solutions need to be evaluated by their outcomes.
- ***Solutions must allow local communities to design and implement their own structural change.*** As the Governor said in his speech, local boards must be incentivized and supported to take on the work of altering structure. Vermonters in each district and SU in Vermont are in the best position to create a new reality.
- ***Structural changes should be encouraged through a mix of incentives and disincentives.*** The incentives should be clear and enticing and should include meaningful construction aid, technology aid, and tax incentives. Negative consequences such as higher local tax rates should not be the sole lever to induce structural change. There must be a results-focused bottom line to the entire process.
- ***Solutions should be crafted to retain strong community connections.*** Changes need to address the need for nimble deployment of resources, somewhat greater scale and achievement of greater equity in our system, but cannot be on a scale that disconnects education from the citizenry. We oppose large, county-wide solutions.

Jeff will now share some background perspectives from the Superintendents. He will be followed by Nicole sharing the specific elements of our proposed strategies.