

## **Vermonters for Schools and Community**

### **Comments on House Education Committee bill draft 1.2**

We thank the House Education committee for considering hundreds of Vermonters positions, ideas and strategies over these last few weeks. As proposals take shape, the key will be incentivizing the changes Vermonters truly want. Real solutions will acknowledge and cultivate schools' and communities' existing assets, allow for a variety of models, and support an innovative, responsive education system that "learns" along with its students. We look forward to continuing the discussion, and we offer the following suggestions.

The draft bill contains several laudable initiatives. Looking at the funding mechanism as a component of addressing property tax relief is critical, and the bill does this. We believe that further study is warranted for developing an education income tax that meets the constitutional standards of equity in the Brigham decision; protects our most economically vulnerable citizens; and creates a better balance between the wealth classes of the proportion of income tax paid.

Additional positive provisions of the bill include providing for more authority for principals; and the placeholder provision for moving up the state property assessment date earlier than April 15.

We believe that in parenting, as in governance, one way to encourage positive change is to reward the activities we want to see, and discourage those we don't.

This first committee draft seems to be attempting to encourage positive change in Vermont's public education system in order to address Vermonters' most-often heard complaints: How to reduce property taxes, and how to address concerns about unequal learning opportunities. We believe this first draft is off-target in both its rewards and disincentives.

The draft bill would establish a new, more centralized, school governance system, and reduce support for the smallest schools in the most economically distressed parts of Vermont. And sadly, evidence that it would either reduce taxpayers' burden or positively affect student outcomes is lacking.

#### **Governance**

The bill would require all supervisory unions to transition into PreK-12 "supervisory districts," dissolving all local school boards in the process. Under this proposal, Vermont would still have exactly the same number of superintendents in exactly the same number of central offices. This approach is unlikely to result in administrative cost savings.

At the same time, eliminating local school boards would remove a vital connection between Vermonters and their schools. Local school boards are comprised of people who are accountable to local citizens. Vermonters everywhere would have dramatically less access to their elected school board under the proposed system. In addition, political control of these new regional boards would be based on population, with more power held in the larger communities in each of the new districts. Those larger communities might welcome the smaller communities' tax base, but not want to carry the cost of their school. They would have the power to close them at will.

The closing of these small schools will be divisive, pitting community against community. Rather than the strong community support for education Vermont now enjoys, this system would disconnect voters from decision making and make passage of the combined budget less likely.

In this draft, the dissolution of the local districts and the formation of the new super-district is automatic. The bill provides some complex and arduous mechanisms for individual town districts to opt-out, but even if the town votes to opt-out, the final decision would be made by the State Board of Education. This solution doesn't

give communities incentive to do what Vermont wants and needs most: collaboration and innovation toward creative new solutions.

### **Finance**

On the funding side, the bill would starve small schools of important support—schools serving many of Vermont’s most rural and vulnerable student populations. Again, the evidence that this will ultimately save money or improve student outcomes is lacking.

The bill would eliminate the Small School Grants for about 80 percent of the schools that now receive them (at a savings of about \$5 million, or 0.3% of statewide education spending). It does spare small schools that are so-called “geographically isolated.” We believe the methodology for determining which schools qualify needs to be more sophisticated, so that it considers the time students would spend on the bus getting from their rural homes to the “other school” if their current school is closed.

The bill would also gut a provision that now softens the landing for schools suffering declining enrollment. The soft landing provision reduces the district’s student count at a slower rate than it is actually reducing, providing it with a little more state funding than it would otherwise receive. The soft landing provision effectively lowers local property taxes in districts with declining enrollment and raises them in other districts. Gutting it, as the bill proposes, would not save money. It simply shifts the property tax burden back on the districts with declining enrollment, many of which are already economically distressed.

This bill sets the stage for many school closings in Vermont. Closing small schools will not necessarily result in lower education taxes for Vermonters. Also, bigger schools and bigger districts do not necessarily lead to more educational opportunity for students. In order to find the best way to provide more educational opportunity for Vermont students, we need more Vermont-specific information. It could be that in bigger schools, a few students take advantage of more courses, but more students are likely to fall through the cracks. We just don’t know. We suggest a specific examination of these questions, before these actions are taken.

### **Education Quality Standards Guide Improvement**

Let’s reward the activities we want to see, and discourage those we don’t want. The Vermont State Board of Education has established a set of Education Quality Standards (EQS) that each school is expected to achieve. They are good standards. The process by which they will be implemented is just starting. That process should result in a strong foundation of knowledge about which schools are failing to provide quality education, and what they need to do to remedy any deficiency in their program.

Rather than making assumptions about school size, the Legislature could ramp up the EQS process by providing the Agency of Education with the mandate to identify deficient schools and to help them improve, and with the funding to do the job well. Schools that fail to show progress toward meeting the Education Quality Standards can be closed by the State Board of Education—no matter how big or small they are.

We need a substantial effort to guide local schools and districts toward improvement where it is needed. There are very good and not-so-good schools of all sizes in Vermont. Build on what is good and help people fix what does not measure up to standards.

*Vermonters for Schools and Community* - [www.vtschoolsrock.org](http://www.vtschoolsrock.org)

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