



Vermont
Superintendents
Association

Testimony of Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director
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House Education Committee
April 12, 2016

S. 241 – An act relating to the regulation of marijuana

In January, the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) adopted the accompanying resolution on the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes. The adoption of the resolution came after the VSA Board of Trustees, individual superintendents and superintendents meeting in regional groups all considered the topic of legalization.

The resolution calls for a thorough analysis of the effects of legalization with a specific focus on children and families. It asks for a thorough analysis of the capacity of the State of Vermont to implement a legalization law effectively and with fidelity.

The legalization of marijuana is too significant an issue to risk unintended consequences.

The consideration and analysis of critical questions related to legalization is an extraordinary undertaking. Evidence of the magnitude is reflected in the extensive testimony taken by the General Assembly on the topic, the information that you are considering, and the diversity of opinion on legalization.

The Vermont Superintendents Association has 59 superintendent members and is staffed by an administrative assistant and me. Obviously, we lack the capacity to undertake the depth of analysis that an issue such as this requires. For that reason, and because the Association has been occupied by an abundance of education-related matters, VSA did not take a position for or against legalization.

Instead, the Association adopted a resolution centered on two principle areas of interest.

They are 1) a call for the General Assembly to be highly confident that legalization will increase protections for children who may be affected by use of marijuana - either their own use or that of family members. And, 2) a call on the General Assembly to be very confident that, with legalization, all involved governmental agencies, including state and local agencies, have the resources, capacity and ability to implement the law fully and with fidelity.

Specifically, the VSA resolution asks that the General Assembly respond to the following questions through its deliberations on legalization:

- 1) With legalization, will access to marijuana by children and adolescents be reduced?
- 2) With legalization, will the protection and advancement of children's well-being, as it relates to preventing the use of marijuana, be improved?
- 3) Will legalization provide involved state and local agencies with all of the resources they need to successfully implement, enforce and monitor the law so that the relevant goals outlined in Sections 1 and 2 of the bill are achieved and sustained?
- 4) Will legalization provide specific resources to the Vermont Department of Health, the Vermont Agency of Education and Vermont school districts in order that they can work more effectively to prevent marijuana use and combat the effects of marijuana use by students and family members.

Those are the questions that our resolution asks the General Assembly to answer. They are important, and represent just a subset of the large array of issues you must consider.

None of the education associations speaking to you this morning was asked to testify in the Senate. The Vermont Agency of Education did not testify in the Senate. Thank you for hearing from us.

As noted above, the VSA and I don't have capacity for the depth of analysis that this issue requires.

That stated, we do have impressions related to the issues outlined above.

First, we hear from school officials that too many children and their families are experiencing tremendous stress related to societal afflictions including generational poverty, situational economic distress, substance abuse and domestic violence. These children, their families and Jeffrey Francis Vermont Superintendents Association April 5, 2016 3 their communities deserve public policies and laws that that improves things for them, not policies and laws that, either because they are poorly designed or poorly implemented, keep conditions the same or make them worse.

Second, we know, when it comes to the delivery of public education and all the things that it entails, our school systems do not possess equal capacities and equal resources. Capacity often does not reflect need. In fact, certain communities with more compelling needs may have substantially less access to resources.

Third, we hear from school officials that the Agency of Education, the Department for Children and Families and area mental health agencies, are hard-pressed to fulfill their current responsibilities in light of expanding needs, dynamic challenges and diminished staff capacity. These and other state and local agencies are already engaged in an uphill battle.

Finally, we believe that the complexities associated with the implementation of public policy as significant as legalization of marijuana should not be underestimated and should rely on a cautionary approach that reflects an extraordinary commitment to get it right.

The matter of the legalization of marijuana is too important an issue to risk unintended consequences. For that reason, a thorough examination of the issue for all of its implications and opportunities is essential.

Thank you