

House Education Committee

February 4, 2015

Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director
Vermont Superintendents Association

“We are still trying to hold on to what we have been and we have not figured out what we are going to be. What we have been is not going to be better. This is an extraordinary opportunity to put our heads together, our shoulders together, and figure out what it means to be a Vermonter. I can tell you that it has to be different.”

Rebecca Holcombe, Vermont Secretary of Education -
Presentation to the Vermont General Assembly - January 9, 2015

In my testimony to the House Education Committee on January 13, I suggested focusing any new proposals for transforming the public education delivery system through the lenses of increased affordability, efficiency and equity in learning opportunities.

Those lenses reflect the need to respond to the realities of today and to prepare for the future.

In our current system, there are thirteen forms of education governance, and costs and property taxes are rising significantly. The viability of our smallest schools is threatened because of dramatic declines in enrollment, and the challenges of affordability and diminishing opportunity are felt by nearly every school community statewide. Evaluation is difficult, outcomes are mixed and school communities and their leaders are stressed.

These issues, and others, were brought into sharp focus this fall through presentations by the Vermont School Boards Association and Secretary Holcombe. These issues were central to the discussions by two hundred

Vermonters at the Vermont Business Roundtable's Green Mountain Imperative Summit for Public Education. And, these issue will not abate in the absence of useful, constructive, change.

We need useful change that will not improve matters for just a single child or school or community, we need change that improves conditions for all.

When it comes to the important matter of transforming our public education system, all of Vermont is our community.

Addressing this rich array of challenges is no easy task - but it is the essential task - it is our collective obligation.

So, with a commitment to be part of the solution, and with confidence that the General Assembly is poised to act, we have joined with the leadership of the VSBA to develop a framework for action that supports the effort to create a better education system for all.

Based on my experience and observations, I believe that this framework for action:

- Responds to the appropriate set of policy goals in order to support the attainment of the critical elements of equity, efficiency and quality within our public education system.
- Promotes a pragmatic, sensible evolution, through cooperation and collaboration, to a system where the better use of resources is the norm.
- Appropriately recognizes that in Vermont, a one-size fits all solution is neither desirable nor possible.

- Acknowledges that if Vermont is to have a better education system, change must occur.

The framework calls for the establishment of integrated prek to grade 12 systems and provides latitude to local electorates in determining how to accomplish that. It prioritizes efficiency, better outcomes, stability and affordability for taxpayers, better conditions for leadership, community voice, transparency and accountability.

The framework supports flexibility by recognizing that integrated prek to grade 12 systems can be governed by a single board or a different configuration of boards when it is demonstrated that doing so provides for the accomplishment of all desired outcomes. It charges the Agency of Education with using increased capacity to provide better data to enable the progression to more efficient and effective integrated systems.

The framework calls for appropriate roles for both the Agency and the State Board of Education.

To put it simply, the framework supports the pathway to a better future for public education and those it serves in Vermont.

Thank you.