

MEMORANDUM

TO: Rep. David Sharpe, Chair, House Education Committee

FROM: Joel D. Cook, Executive Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: January 22, 2015

SUBJECT: Identifying "the problem[s]" – a typed version of my 1/21 testimony

Last week, you requested I "define the problem" and solutions to it. It's a bit early for the latter, and there is no single problem. I identify a number of issues the Committee may wish to consider as problems. "Solving" one may exacerbate another. That, of course, will present additional problems.

Some of these are substantive, and some matters of perception, but they all are real issues confronting us as a state and as educators:

1. Declining number of children. We live in a state coming to terms with losing its number of children, and we measure school costs on a per pupil basis rather than on a community or school basis. As a state (not just as educators), the biggest challenge we all face is making Vermont and, particularly, its small rural communities, again truly inviting places for families. We don't need more schools, but we might make good use of just about all there are if we can turn around what is merely a symptom of a larger challenge for our state. Why is it that we here – along with so many national surveys – place such a high value on the quality of life in Vermont but we remain caught in a decline in the number of school-aged children?

2. Our children's problems. Whatever their numbers, today's children present challenges, in kind and degree, far greater than in earlier generations, and it is to the schools – and the Education Fund – to which we have increasingly resorted to address them. That has significant implications for staffing and cost.

3. School funding formulas are complicated. The more progressive they are, the more complicated they become. That does not mean we should sacrifice progressivity for simplicity. It does mean we should strive to make clearer to taxpayers both what they are paying and its connection with their votes on budgets.

4. The cost-shifting from state to school district. This occurs directly (e.g., by simply shorting the General Fund transfer or moving expense items into the Education Fund) and via service shifts to schools (requiring school budgets to adjust upward). And it all manifests itself as outsized increases in per pupil costs.

5. Where we live. Our settlement patterns make the goal of "efficiency" elusive – not simply in public education, but also in municipal government and a variety of other 'things' about our small state. It is not unrelated to the age-old debate between government efficiency and democracy - The most efficient government we know is dictatorship, but we believe that individuals and communities need to be part of the process.

6. "Superintendency-centric." The struggle over governance has recently become all about having the supervisory union central office take more and more control over our systems of education. The tension between that legitimate perspective and the legitimate perspective of local communities, which have supported their schools over the years, doesn't go away with rhetoric – even legitimate rhetoric – about the difficulties of making efficient pre-K – 12 system decisions.

7. Opportunities for children. They are not measured only by the diversity of curricular offerings. Generally, however broad a curriculum is, the great majority of our students remain within a rather narrow band of courses. Of course, there are limits, and the problem is determining what they are. The key to helping narrow the achievement gap is the provision of schooling where individual children are not just numbers and that provides big quantities of individual attention. If some schools – small or large – are not stimulating our kids, that's where we should focus.

8. "Do something." There is a press to do "something," and that atmosphere does not often lead to the best decisions.

9. The rhetoric. The recent rhetoric about what our schools cost and what they produce is having an especially troubling effect on current and potential professional educators. The impact of it all may feel secondary to many, but our educators remain the most important component in a very high quality education system into the future. The problem right now is the extent to which teachers and school personnel generally, despite intermittent statements from state leaders praising the quality of Vermont education and Vermont educators, feel attacked by the increasing rhetoric about their numbers and the cost they present to the public. We are very concerned about the prospects for our continued success in recruiting consistently high caliber professionals into teaching.