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To: House Education Committee
From: Nicole Mace, Executive Director
Re: Vermont's Education Voucher System
Date: March 17, 2016

Vermont is one of only two states that allow towns lacking an elementary or secondary school to pay tuition for their students to attend another public or private school. A unique feature of Vermont is that students may also take their "town tuition" to a school out of state.

According to data from the Agency of Education, 5,390 Vermont students participated in the town tuitioning program this year, representing close to 7% of total state public school enrollment. Of those 5,390 students, more than half use their voucher to attend a private school or academy. Nationally, voucher participation represents less than 1/2 of 1% of the total school-age population (Center for Public Education, 2015).

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Like school voucher programs, town tuitioning provides taxpayer dollars to students that they can use to pay for public or private school. Eligibility in Vermont is open to all students who are residents of a tuition paying town. However, there is no requirement that private schools accepting public tuition dollars admit all students from tuitioning school districts who wish to attend.

There have been numerous studies of voucher programs over the years, but generalizing findings is difficult because the programs are small and vary from one state to the next. Researchers who have looked across studies tend to conclude that the programs may provide some advantage to some students, but in general have made little difference.

A 2015 report from the Center for Public Education (CPE) found that "research has demonstrated that vouchers do not have a strong effect on students' academic achievement."

The Vermont tuitioning system is an outlier in many respects, most notably in its long history and the ability to carry vouchers across state lines and even national borders. Vermont also has minimal accountability for student performance for

independent schools receiving public dollars, whereas the trend across the country is to establish some kind of performance indicators for schools accepting vouchers (Center for Public Education, 2015).

Independent schools that are the recipients of public dollars under the town tuitioning construct do not have to follow the same requirements as public schools, and often do not serve the same students that public schools do. Data prepared by the Agency of Education in January of 2016 illustrate that while 40% of students in Vermont public schools are eligible for free and reduced lunch, just 28% of publicly-funded students attending independent schools and 25% of publicly-funded students attending one of the four historical academies, are FRL-eligible. Some independent schools offer minimal categories of special education, or require families to contribute to the costs of special education services out-of-pocket.

Independent schools are also free to set tuition rates that vary from town to town. While public school districts must offer the same tuition terms to all sending towns, independent schools are exempt from this rule (16 V.S.A. 824). Independent schools' tuition is the average announced tuition of union high schools *except* in towns where the electorate approves a higher tuition amount. In these towns, the higher tuition voted by the electorate pays the full tuition for resident students.

In towns that do not authorize tuition payments over and above the average announced rate, parents are often responsible for paying the difference. In some independent schools the difference can be paid out of school-operated scholarship programs. The extent of this practice and of parent-paid tuition is unknown as independent schools are not required to disclose their financial data.

I now want to share my concerns regarding the possible expansion of school choice vouchers to school districts that operate schools. I believe that doing so would result in greater socio-economic stratification, increased costs to taxpayers, and the rapid decline of vulnerable public schools in rural parts of the state.

Greater socio-economic stratification – While “choice” might appear to expand opportunity for struggling students, in reality the students most likely to make use of the voucher system are those that have the means to, including having access to transportation. This reality will lead to some public schools serving higher populations of struggling students, further exacerbating the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Increased costs – By expanding the voucher model, school districts will have to bear the cost of both operating a public school and paying tuition for all students who wish to use a voucher. In a state with growing excess capacity in our public schools and persistent concerns about high taxes, why would we pursue a scheme that will increase costs?

Rapid decline of rural public schools - Four years after adopting a policy allowing for tuition vouchers, Concord High School closed. When more and more students who can do so leave the system using a voucher, school districts struggle to pay for quality programming in the school they operate. The inability to provide quality programs will lead more parents to opt out of the system, causing more public schools to close.

Act 46 of 2015 passed in response to real and persistent concerns about equity, quality, and cost effectiveness in a state educating 20,000 fewer students today than we were less than two decades ago. Since the passage of the law, more than 40 communities across Vermont have agreed to unify their systems in order to achieve the goals of the Act: greater equity, higher quality, increased cost effectiveness, transparency and accountability.

Vermont's public education system is one of our greatest resources. It is a system that is engaged in a period of transformation as we respond to our demographic and fiscal realities. Our organization supported the governance provisions of Act 46 because they serve the right goals: greater equity of opportunity at a cost that taxpayers can support. Expanding the tuition voucher system would result in outcomes that are in direct conflict with those goals.