

March 21, 2016

S. 217 - Statement of Steven John, Chair, Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators

Dear Senator White and members of the Government Operations Committee,

I am writing in regard to S. 217, "An act relating to the State's organization of professional regulation." The Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators is responsible for establishing standards, including endorsement standards, for the issuance of an educator license, along with the monitoring and oversight of the licensing process administered by the AOE licensing office. As Chair of the VSBPE, I felt it was important to add my voice and insights.

The first thing that strikes me about the bill is the policy statement (relative to licensed educators), which states that the purpose of the this bill is to "completely transfer from the Agency of Education to the Office (of Professional Regulation) the licensure of professions already regulated by the Office."

As a 46 year professional educator (41 years in Vermont and currently the Superintendent of Schools for Windham Central SU), I strongly believe that any legislation that has an impact on the public schools and students we teach should have a purpose that directly relates to improving outcomes for our students. I do not see any mention of improved student outcomes in the policy statement, or proposed law. I have heard about concerns around "convenience" for licensees and "streamlining" the licensure process for teachers who also hold a clinical license through OPR. With all due respect, I think S. 217 may have that backwards. The primary focus of any licensing scheme for educators should be directly tied to improving instructional practices that can result in better outcomes for students.

In my view, it is perfectly appropriate that the licensing process be generally viewed as demanding. It should be. I am not aware of any evidence to suggest that making licensure more convenient will improve classroom teaching and help improve student outcomes. The public has a tremendous financial investment in education and it should be challenging to obtain an educator license. Public education is the foundation of our democratic society. And think about it this way, in other licensed professions, such as barbers or doctors and other professions licensed by OPR, consumers have a choice. Our students and parents are consumers without a choice. A child is assigned to a teacher. A child cannot choose a teacher the way a consumer can choose a service from some other OPR licensee. Undoubtedly, a professional educator should engage a rigorous process to obtain the certifications necessary to teach in the public schools. That is one of the most important things we can do (and actually do) to ensure that our students receive a quality education. This pertains to all educators in a school building, including those who also happen to hold a clinical license issued by OPR.

Fundamentally, a speech language pathologist or a school nurse or other educator licensee that is also licensed through OPR is as much an educator as any other classroom teacher. The faculty in a school building must work as a team to insure student success because teaching is a team effort among professional colleagues. Each educator is a part of the team, not an individual bead on a string who can be categorized or differentiated because he/she may also hold a clinical license.

WCSU will ...place students at the center of our decision-making.
...build trust and respect by acting ethically, transparently, and with integrity.
...operate as a community of learners, committed to developing the skills and capabilities of all.
...collaborate, share and seek creative solutions.

I have a real concern that the focus of this bill strives to accommodate a reductionist approach for convenience of licensees at the potential expense of very real gains that have been made over time to create robust standards for educator licensure. This historical perspective is very important, and seems lost in the current debate. When I began my career in public education in 1969, we did not see educator licensing as a process to support educators reflecting on their practice and improving it. Our standards for educator licensure now are based on professional growth over the course of an educator's career in the profession. This perspective evolved over time, and reflects the fact that educator licensing is a nuanced exercise, which requires judgment at each step of the process; this process often lacks bright lines.

That is why the role of the AOE is not merely ministerial in administering the policies of the Standards Board, and issuing licenses. It is much more than just checking off a box that certifies someone is eligible to teach in the public schools. It is critical that AOE retains its administration role. This is not about form. This is about substance. The AOE has highly trained staff that can respond to the unique needs of Vermont's school leaders and classroom teachers with highly technical and individual questions. This expertise will be lost to the field under the proposed bill. This would not be in the interests of school administrators, educators, or their students. As a superintendent of schools and longtime administrator and teacher in Vermont, I can assure you that we (teachers and administrators) need the resources of the AOE and the Local Standards Boards to insure compliance with and the value of Vermont's standards for a professional educator's license.

In closing, I urge the committee to contemplate my first point, regarding the policy purpose of this legislation. It should begin and end with improving student outcomes. I understand that licensing for educators can seem unique and cumbersome among professions. Whatever one's opinion about the licensure process, the policy goals that underlie it are sound. We need every single licensed educator, to the extent possible, to be ready and willing to provide our children with the best instructional practices. That goal is not negotiable. And that is why I firmly believe we need to maintain all educator licensing through the Agency of Education, as the administering body of the policies and procedures of the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators.

I would be happy to appear before your committee. Thank you for your consideration of my comments.

Sincerely,



Steven John, Chair
Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators