

To: House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs

From: Elaine Carpenter, Chair, Fairfax Board of School Directors; Franklin West Supervisory Union board member; Vermont School Boards Association Board of Directors

Re: Education Labor Relations

Date: February 19, 2015

Thank you for this opportunity to talk with you about my views on school boards and labor relations. My background is education as I have been a public school teacher and administrator and have also served Fairfax on our Board of School Directors for the past 7 years, having been chair for the past 5 years. I have negotiated numerous teacher and paraeducator contracts. In Franklin West Supervisory Union we are currently in the fact-finding stage for our teacher contract and we have just started negotiating a new paraeducator contract.

Let me share some background with you about Franklin West Supervisory Union. We comprise the towns of Georgia, Fairfax and Fletcher. We have recently been chosen as an Apple Distinguished Program for our innovation, leadership, educational excellence and our clear vision of exemplary learning environments. Our school board members are looking at ways to restructure our educational system while improving opportunities and outcomes for students.

For you to understand our school boards' challenges with labor relations, it is critical that you understand 21st century education for our students and teachers. Teachers no longer stand in front of the classroom and lecture on information that students will be quizzed on; rather they are guides and facilitators for each individual student's learning plan. Our vision is that our schools will be rich learning environments, embracing multiple ways of reaching goals for each of our students. An example would be a student who is doing an internship in the community and comes to school for additional late afternoon classes. Teachers could be available for online learning support during non-traditional school times. We are being challenged to meet students' individual learning needs in new and non-traditional ways. We as a school board are ready and willing to move forward on this vision.

In order to move forward, we need to be able to address such important issues in our teacher contracts as the following:

- Flexibility in teachers hours – some teachers would have different work hours depending on the needs of our students. Act 77 Flexible Pathways for students will include options such as community-based learning, internships, and independent studies that will require teacher availability outside of the traditional school hours.
- Health care – it is critical that we begin to transition to different health plans. Health care costs are currently 10.2% of our budget in Fairfax.
- Teacher evaluations – we have developed a teacher evaluation system implemented last year. This will include feedback from both students and families. How can we use this information to best meet the needs of our students as well as our teachers?
- Locations for learning – Learning for our students will be happening in places other than our school building. How can we ensure that our students are supported by our teachers in places other than our school building?
- Reduction in Force – Currently teachers are ranked according to how long they have been teaching so if a position needs to be reduced or eliminated, the most recent hire is the teacher to be considered. Think about this for a minute. We are moving our students towards proficiency based learning where they are given credit for coursework mastered, not “seat time”, or time spent in class. Let’s just imagine that we could do the same with our teaching staff? Let’s rank teachers based on their mastery of teaching skills and not on “school time” or how many years they have been in the classroom. As we all know, time spent teaching does not equate to teaching excellence. If we really want to promote excellence in instruction and higher student outcomes, we have to address this issue.

Currently what happens when we bring up innovative issues such as these into our negotiations is that there is reluctance to even discuss them because they are new and different. This conservative approach to change allows for only incremental changes in our contracts each year.

If we cannot come to agreement on a contract, the process moves to fact finding. A fact finder reviews all information from both sides and issues a determination. The basis for the report is “comparables”, looking at other contracts in similar districts that are comparable to ours. I am concerned that there are no “comparables” for our new and creative thinking about education. If school board members endorse greater flexibility in teacher hours or a new way to look at Reduction in Force, there is no other district to use as a “comparable”. We are challenged in how to make substantive progress as we move our schools and students forward. I am in favor of a process that supports creativity and innovation in our contracts so I am in support of H102.

The fact finders report should also take into consideration other issues. We need to look at a community's ability to pay, the demographics of the community, the consumer price index, tax burdens, employment data and measures of household and personal income. In one of our districts, a new teacher starting out at the lowest salary would be making more than the average income of the residents of that town. Also, what is the history of passing budgets in each community? In Fairfax last year it took us three votes to pass a budget. We heard over and over again that the driving concern for voters was the high cost of teacher salaries which comprise almost 80% of the budget. Certainly this is an important factor to be considered in a community's ability to pay. We need to break away from fact-finders making recommendations based primarily on salary and health insurance settlements in each region.

Another bill you are considering is H76. I only have one comment on this bill. Vermont communities now make decisions about their community schools. If we move towards a system of binding interest arbitration, we are turning over local decisions on wages, benefits and other contract issues to third parties. These people have no tie to the community as well as no fiscal responsibility or accountability. Currently binding interest arbitration does not allow for any new or creative proposals. Let's look at what alternatives we might have to binding interest arbitration.

In closing I would like to say that Vermonters are asking for a change in education funding as well as outcomes. We as school board members are feeling the continued pressure to cut costs. We do have options. Your local school board members are more than ready to negotiate changes to our collective bargaining agreements to promote improved outcomes if you develop a process for us that will support creative and innovative thinking. I am passionate about public education and I know we can do better.

Thank you for giving me the chance to share my opinions about these issues.