

Senate Ed Committee Testimony

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Jon Guiffre: Roxbury School Board Chair

Hello, my name is Jon Guiffre and I am the Roxbury School Board Chair. I spoke last year at the 883 public hearing strongly urging the legislature to stop tinkering with our broken system. I urged the joint body to seek fundamental changes to public education in Vermont because our current system cannot be fixed with incremental half measures. Now I am back to do the same.

I urge you to truly listen to my words this time as I won't beat around the bush. Our Legislature has lost the plot with regard to education reform. The pressure to do "something" has caused both bodies to become lost in the morass of the details - failing yet again, to see the big picture.

To be fair, you are being asked to solve an immensely complicated problem you haven't been well equipped for. You and your House colleagues aren't full time employees with large staffs and financial resources to produce possible solutions. So, each year the legislature scrambles to provide another attempt to play with financial incentives, tax structures, and ideas on how to cajole districts (and most recently in the House version strong arming districts) into making those choices. But as far as I can tell, the voters, through their district behaviors, continue to respond affirmatively "no" to each attempt.

So yet again, I ask you on behalf of all Vermonters who want a real and lasting solution to educating our children - please stop. Please stop the tinkering and fooling around with half measures and ideas that really aren't going to make any significant changes - case in point 883 which was self admittedly not going to save any money. Legislatures are not designed to create a brilliant educational vision and policy. Have the courage to say, "we need to seek a new direction" and then guide the specialists to take us there. Please let this bill die.

We have a bright new Secretary of Education who is clearly not being charged with the task of overhauling a dysfunctional system. Give her that charge. I have personally asked her twice to do so. I did my part by presenting her with a 20 page PowerPoint on how we could reform, improve, and perhaps save. Ultimately, however, we need someone like her with her background and resources to design the "product" and not just provide testimony to the Legislature. Our children's education is far too important to leave it up to the endless compromises that occur when there are several hundred chefs stirring the pot.

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If our system was functional, none of us would be sitting here right now. Tweaking financial formulas is not how you create excellent schools. In fact, it leads to idiotic

ideas like spending caps which are the epitome of legislating to the least common denominator.

Please stop. Next session when the pressure to "do something" pops up again, turn to the group of people who have the time, experience, and background in designing educational vision to create that path. As leaders in our community, it is important to recognize when there are others better equipped to provide the solutions. If you want to succeed, that is how this body and our entire legislature can succeed in serving their constituents. Half measures are always only that, and this is not a system that can be incrementally fixed over time. It is in desperate need of a complete overhaul.

Lastly, please have the courage to lead our citizens in understanding that educating our children is not cheap. Public servants must walk the fine line between leadership and service. It is not one or the other and the hardest part is having the courage to lead when it is necessary. This is one of those times.

We live in a state where a fluctuating population, in the best years, leaves us with enough students to support our current structure. The recent decline in enrollment (although not as catastrophic as has been popularly reported) has provided us the opportunity to re-examine how we educate in Vermont and how we pay for it. We have an opportunity, not a problem, but unfortunately the only attempts by the legislature have been effort to adjust one small cog in the system - the cost.

Education is the key to our State's future. If we have poor and/or underfunded schools because our legislators want to save tax payers a couple hundred bucks on their property taxes for some brownie points, we have really lost the plot. If you think our state budget gap is bad now, wait until we ruin our schools with endless tinkering of a defunct system. In a state that is already expensive to live in, why would young families choose to move to that same State with an education system in turmoil? Have the courage to lead our state in understanding that this is an investment in our state's future and that it is part of the bigger puzzle that makes a challenging state economy viable in the long run.