

## **A PATH AHEAD FOR AN EDUCATION BILL IN 2015**

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I want to start out reminding the committee that the VSBA represents the school boards of Vermont, understanding that education is a joint endeavor with the legislature setting state policy and overseeing the funding system and local boards overseeing the actual operation. With nearly 300 elected boards and 1500 individuals serving, there is a wide range of opinion about what should be done. You have heard from some board members who are very opposed to anything being done. We have received communications from several supervisory union boards expressing concern about the bill, as have you. I don't, for a minute, want to present the VSBA ideas as representative of everyone.

Having said that, our organization and its leadership has decided that we must stay focused on the issues of equity, quality and cost and need to help find the path forward, rather than trying to stop the efforts of the General Assembly. We have spent a great deal of time over the past two years talking about the issues of equity, quality, and flattening the trend line of per-student costs increases. That included meetings with some 600 people at our regional meetings this past fall. A resolution adopted by our membership acknowledges our challenges and commits to finding pathways ahead. Our 27-member board consists of school board members from across the state and provides ongoing guidance. Our board overwhelmingly passed a motion last night to support the general direction that I am going to share with you. We remain committed to trying to help find a path forward.

On February 10, we came to the committee and put forward some principles and some guidelines for what legislative action might look like. We also brought before you a week or two later a group of school districts that are very diverse, all of whom had a story to tell. All of whom described the way they see the world and how a nudge from the legislature might be of assistance-- St Albans, Middlebury, South Royalton, and Orange East.

Share hand out of proposal that we distributed on February 10.

Apart from caps, which we adamantly oppose, H. 361 has been generally responsive to the direction we put forward. There are some significant areas that need work, but we are feeling that between H. 361 and your ideas, there should be a path forward.

The strengths of H.361 are as follows:

- It lays out the goal being PreK-12 Education Systems defined as somewhat larger entities that are responsible for the effective and efficient delivery of education to all students in the region and designed to achieve important outcomes. This must be the focus of the bill, the focus of school boards, the focus of the Agency and the State Board. The focus must not be on the number of school boards, or the specific number of students, or even the structure.
- The House bill allows for single board or multi board options. You wouldn't know it from much of the public discussion, but it does. We appreciate that. The language in H.361 is complex and is conducive to confusion, not just for the media and for public conversation, but ultimately for school districts and for the State Board. It needs to be more clear in a final bill. The options cannot be too complex to follow. They should also not be articulated as collapse all school boards into a single board or do nothing—the expectation should be that all children are served in a PreK-12 Education System that is large enough to achieve the expected outcomes. It is certainly easier to do that with a single board, but there are a number of reasons why that won't be practical, legal, or desirable in various parts of Vermont.
- It expects all boards to engage in this process and to design their own path forward to achieve the desired outcomes. It seems that is a universally held value.
- It includes incentives and disincentives for action. Generally, we think that what is in the bill is OK. We continue to believe that it is a stronger bill with greater incentives-- construction, technology, tax incentives, etc. If you are on a board and people are skeptical of the whole process, there is nothing like a strong incentive to provide political cover for boards. Look at the 60's and the closure of countless high schools in this state and the creation of Union High Schools-- local boards were able to get behind those changes because the incentives were huge and the benefits to children were unmistakable.
- It includes some attention to performance reviews. There is acknowledgement of the Agency's district assessment process. We like your versions better.

My point with these comments is that the direction of H.361 is correct, outside of the caps. It needs work, but is directionally correct.

Challenges that need to be addressed:

- Caps are bad public policy. They should be removed from the bill.
- Revisit the minimum number of students. Instead of a single hard number, the language could specify intent—e.g. It is the intention of the General Assembly that PreK-12 systems should generally serve at least 1000 students). But the focus of the new

system and the state board should be on whether the outcomes can be achieved. (We would strongly urge against any consideration of fewer and larger Supervisory Unions—they would take us in the wrong direction and would further weaken local connections.)

- Improve clarity on the structural options available to regions—although they are all in H.361, they should be less confusing. We would urge you to use language that may look more like: “Integrated PreK-12 Education Systems may be delivered through a Supervisory District structure (one unified board for the region) or may be delivered through a Supervisory Union structure.” In either instance, the region must be able to show that education at all levels can be delivered equitably, with quality, and at reasonable cost, and in a way that promotes the attraction and retention of quality leadership.

This part of any bill may need to be accompanied by some further clarity on the role and operation of the supervisory union to make clear that this is not a status quo option, but that an SU board has responsibility for outcomes related to all students in the region and must operate effectively and efficiently.

- The dates need to be moved back by one year. By the time a bill passes and criteria are developed, there will be less than two years left. Some districts have a lot of work to do. More importantly, the Agency will not be ready to support all of this activity at the same time, and the state board will not be ready to process large numbers of applications. The move of dates should include offering RED incentives until July 1, 2018.
- There are no new resources for the Agency or the State Board to support implementation. This is an enormous undertaking and there appears to be little interest in addressing the resources needed for success. Implementation is likely to be unsuccessful without some investment. We would question the wisdom of passing an ambitious law that is not properly supported. We have had too much experience in recent years with ambitious government initiatives that stumble in their implementation.