

## **Ken Page's Testimony to the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday, January 14, 2015**

**Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about problems and solutions in education from the school leaders' perspective.**

**Today I want to address three areas:**

- 1. The Problems**
- 2. The Opportunities**
- 3. The Unintended Consequence If We Don't Act**

**Although I have previously testified to this body, not everyone may be familiar with me or with my organization. So, here is a very brief synopsis. The Vermont Principals' Association, based here in Montpelier at 2 Prospect Street, has existed since 1915 to serve learners and leaders in Vermont. We are involved with student activities with K-12 schools throughout the state. We run all high school sports tournaments as well as a host of other activities such as Debate, the state One Act Play competition, the State Spelling Bee as well as the Geography Bee and many more activities. Many years ago, people referred to us as the Vermont Headmasters' Association, and at that time, we only were involved with sports and student activities. However, since the mid 90's VPA has expanded its mission to support school leaders by offering professional development, regional meetings, principal mentoring and by advocating for school leaders here in the general assembly. Each year, we run a three-day Leadership Academy in Killington for our leaders and run helpful workshops throughout the year to help leaders strengthen their skills for their multi-faceted jobs**

**My background in a nutshell is this: I have been involved with education and in schools my entire working career, mostly here in Central Vermont. I was a teacher for 15 years at both Lebanon Jr. High and U-32 High School, a principal for 21 years at Calais and at Crossett Brook Middle School in Duxbury. This is my sixth year as the Executive Director of VPA. My point of view is entirely from the eyes of the practitioner, someone who has been in the trenches, so to speak. I was hired as one of the leaders to guide the formation of an entirely new school district, the Waterbury-Duxbury School District in 1996. So, whereas others can talk about what a school consolidation might look like, I can say with assurance how a school consolidation works and what results could come from it because I have both started a new district and closed a school in the process.**

**I know firsthand that structural and governance changes can be made that make a permanent difference. When the communities of Waterbury and Duxbury decided to work together to reconfigure their primary school to be a preK to grade 4 building for children from both communities, when we built a new middle school for grade 5-8 to serve students from both towns, and when we returned their grade 7&8 students to join their 4th&5<sup>th</sup> graders in a new middle school, we both increased educational quality, saved money and developed a sustainable education plan for our communities far into the future. We also upgraded our 100 year old primary school, so, facility wise, they are now in good shape because of their vision, and planning. Therefore, I know that it CAN be done.**

**But it takes some out-of-the-box thinking and a willingness to let the practitioners, the people who know schools, who actually work with children in schools, into the process to shape the process and to keep the focus on what's practical, what's do-able and what makes**

sense for kids. I attended the House Education Committee session and I have perused the schedules of witnesses in the coming days for both the senate education and house education. Make no mistake about it, I know you are going to hear from some incredible intelligent people who are system thinkers and who have big solutions to the problems facing education today. However, I find myself asking if they have ever taught kids, managed and evaluated school staff, consoled a distraught parent, cut a school program or charted a bold vision for a school and moved a staff and community toward that vision? In short, have they walked the talk?

Research has proven time and again that the teacher has the greatest influence and impact on students. However, right behind every great teacher is a great school leader. In fact, about a quarter of the school improvement test score increases can be directly attributed to an effective school leader. A recent NASSP brief about possible ESEA (aka No Child Left Behind) reauthorization stated: "The emphasis on school level outcomes and student achievement places the school leader at the center of all school improvement efforts. Today's principals and assistant principals are expected to be visionary leaders, instructional experts, building managers, assessment specialists, disciplinarians, community builders and more; they are also the ones ultimately held responsible for student achievement. "

Senators, your time is valuable, so I will be brief. My organization includes nearly 500 members who are school principals, assistant principals, athletic directors, aspiring leaders, principal mentors and retired principals. I am in regular contact with leaders who want advice, who want us to weigh in on legislation, who need help working with a state agency or who have a sports or activity question. You have invited me to join you today, so I am assuming that you value the practitioner's opinion.

### What Are the Problems?

From my organization's point of view, the amount of principal turnover is troubling, and it signals that the jobs have become un-doable for some. Nationally, there is about 20% turnover of principals yearly. In Vermont, we are slightly higher than that. With 432 principals and assistant principals, we turn over between 70 and 100 school leaders yearly. It is impossible to sustain school improvement efforts and results with so much frequent turnover. Let me add here that several years ago, you passed a principal mentoring law which has helped considerably.

Principals as middle level managers articulate to their boards what is needed to make their organization work safely and well, but, all too often, find themselves in budget meetings making difficult decisions about cutting programs, cutting staff, cutting supplies and delaying maintenance and infrastructure needs.

From recent communications from principals, I have heard this: "Although we are supposed to be helping our schools to improve, we are all too often dealing with children of the Great Recession and Vermont's plague of narcotics addiction." The principal who wrote this unbelievable letter to Governor Shumlin and to me then went into painstaking details with examples of children who need intensive and expensive support from extra school personnel. Really, there is no doubt that today's schools have taken on the role of social service agency as well as suppliers of breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner, as well as drug counselors, and many other support roles. Secondly, principals said loudly to tell you that we need to

slow down with new initiatives. They want to do a good job implementing Act 77 and the new preschool legislation but if more big initiatives come their way, they run the risk of diluting their efforts and being unsuccessful with all of them. They said: Please give us time to do a few initiatives well; Third, the principals told me that the pressure to contain costs is so ever present. They wondered if the constant talk of school finances alone has dominated over the value of their work and has had a detrimental effect on the overall support schools get from parents and taxpayers and voters.

### **What's the The Opportunity?**

So, although one could look at the declining enrollments in schools and the increasing cost of education as problems, I see that them as an opportunity to rebalance our system, to redefine what we mean by local control, to discuss how to right-size our schools, to make clear the roles and responsibilities of teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards, to have a healthy and democratic discussion about the cost of education.

The challenge for all of us and especially for the Vermont Legislature is to determine if the witnesses who come forward will provide you with real-life grounded solutions, are able to put aside their own self-interests for the good of the whole, and are able to trust in a process and in the people who will move us forward.

And speaking of trusting people, in Secretary Holcombe, principals have a trusted educator who has come from our ranks who is both a practitioner and a researcher with grounded ideas about how to improve our education system. She has advocated for a balanced accountability model; she has promoted school quality reviews, she has listened to the field and is showing us the way forward without sacrificing quality. It is a pleasure to call her our colleague.

The Vermont Principals' Association is eager to lend our voices to this important education discussion. We are with your teaching staffs and with your children everyday; we are with your school board members and your superintendents of schools at night; we see you at school and community activities. We as your school leaders believe that we bring a knowledgeable, practical and hopefully an optimistic voice to the table. We hope you will make use of our practical knowledge as you debate education issues this session. Simply let me know who you need, and when you need them and I will get school people to you.

### **The Biggest Unintended Consequence If We Don't Act**

Some may think that the biggest consequence of not acting is that more budgets may be defeated on Town Meeting Day, that tax rates will continue to climb and that schools will be even more expensive next year.

But that's not it at all.

The biggest unintended consequence we see is this: With all the talk about school consolidation, limiting school budgets, the need for less school personnel and how difficult people's jobs are today, *I'm afraid that the biggest problem will be that highly-talented young people will not EVER want to go into education and will not EVER be inspired to make teaching and leading their life's work, as I did.* Or, worse than that, they will see being a teacher or a school leader simply as a job and not as a rewarding and fulfilling career that can change lives and make other people's lives better.

**In essence, it will kill optimism, promise and energy to solve the state, the country and the world's most pressing problems. And, if that happens, shame on us.**

**When people refer to "The Finland Experience," they talk about teaching as a calling, that the profession is held in such high regard and that only a select few are given the opportunity to work with their country's most valuable commodity—their children.**

**The Vermont Principals' Association takes its motto of supporting learners and leaders seriously; we trust that you as our dedicated legislators will tackle this problem head on, will listen to both the policy people and with the talented worker bees in the field, and that we will emerge with a commonsense plan that is forward looking and that sensibly helps us to right size our schools and preserves the great equalizer which is a decent education.**

**The time to act is now.**

**Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.**