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TESTIMONY TO SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and Happy New Year.

For the record, my name is Lisa Ventriss, President of Vermont Business Roundtable. I am a native of Addison County and have been the chief spokesperson for the Roundtable since 2002.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Green Mountain Imperative.

Before I do, and for those unfamiliar with the Roundtable, allow me to provide a short background on who we are, what we do, how we are unique from other business organizations, and why education has been our # 1 public policy priority for 25 years.

- We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan civic welfare organization of chief executive officers of Vermont's leading private and nonprofit employers, representing geographic diversity and all major sectors of the Vermont economy.
- The Roundtable is committed to sustaining a sound economy and preserving Vermont's unique quality of life by studying and making recommendations on statewide public policy issues.
- Our first policy paper on education was released in 1989 and entitled, "Vermont's Unspoken Danger: Educating Our Children for the 21st Century", and it called upon stakeholders to form a successful partnership to improve the K-12 educational system and to educate everyone to their full potential, by:

- Identifying learning outcomes by
 - Holding educators accountable for achieving the learning outcomes, and
 - Assessing whether the system is achieving the learning outcomes.
- Since that time and in addition to our other policy work, the Roundtable has expanded our thinking to embrace an integrated PreK-16 education model.

We have also created or helped to create meaningful and timeless initiatives that benefit all Vermonters. These include, among others:

- Young Writers Project
- Born to Read
- Nordic Educational Trust Scholarships
- Pulse of Vermont: Quality of Life Survey and, the
- Green Mountain Imperative.

These can be found on our website ~ www.vtroundtable.org .

“While no one can predict what advances the next twenty years will bring, we do know that Vermont will not have a workforce capable of meeting the challenges presented by those advances until we have effective, adaptable education systems to maximize opportunities for each and every Vermont citizen. The Roundtable believes that the transition from today’s learning environment to the environment of the future will take time to accomplish, and the process must begin now.”

**“Having the Courage to Change: How to Avoid the Coming Workforce Crisis”
Vermont Business Roundtable, 2006**

With this as backdrop, let me now speak to the Green Mountain Imperative process and findings, which are contained in the report you’ve been provided.

I will not be sharing specific solutions today, but highlighting those areas that we believe to have the greatest potential for meaningful change.

GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE – THE CONCEPT

Starting immediately after the end of the 2014 session, the Roundtable met with several key stakeholders to talk about the growing urgency around education reforms, as evidenced by:

- 37 failed school budgets in 2014, with the possibility of even more in this year;
- Municipal and school leaders' concerns over property taxes and rising costs of education;
- Vermonters' concerns that their children are not being properly prepared for a successful future either in the workforce or in some kind of post-secondary education;
- NCLBA 2014 report that identifies Vermont's schools as underachieving; and,
- H.883 Education Governance from the prior session that received unprecedented support from the education and business communities.

We found that the time was right for a different kind of public conversation that focused around three educational imperatives:

1. Equity in opportunity;
2. Efficiency in delivery; and,
3. Systems capacity in preserving public education as a public good.

GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE – THE PROCESS

The **Green Mountain Imperative: A Breakthrough Summit on Vermont's Public Education** was convened over two days last November. It was planned, designed, and constructed by eight GMI Summit Partners including:

- Building Bright Futures

- Secretary of Education
- Speaker of the House
- Vermont Business Roundtable
- Vermont Community Foundation
- Vermont School Boards Association
- Vermont Superintendents Association, and
- Vermont Student Assistance Corporation

It was sponsored by nine Funders, including:

- Building Bright Futures
- Let's Grow Kids
- J. Warren and Lois McClure Foundation, a supporting organization of the Vermont Community Foundation
- Nellie Mae Education Foundation
- The Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children
- Ernest Pomerleau
- Richard E. and Deborah L. Tarrant Foundation & The Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at UVM
- Vermont Business Roundtable, and
- Vermont Community Foundation

The GMI Summit's 200 attendees comprised a list of Vermont's best public education thinkers and represented categories of virtually every stakeholder who is either impacted by or impactful of education policy in this state:

- The education community: teachers, teachers of the year, union representatives, principals, students, parents, superintendents, school board members, special educators, early ed, higher ed, and tech ed
- Business leaders
- Elected and appointed officials from state government
- Philanthropy
- Media, policy analysts
- State Board of Ed

Participants were required to read and sign a “Participant Pledge”, in which they:

- Committed to the goal of providing high quality education for every Vermont student,
- Pledged to cooperate and collaborate in a manner that is honest and respectful of differing perspectives, and
- Sought solutions in service of the collective good.

The GMI Summit was facilitated by a team that employed the Appreciate Inquiry “SOAR” analysis;

- an environmental scan around key Strengths and Opportunities, but with an intentional focus on Aspirations and Results; and identified
- Outcomes most desired that propel strategic visions forward for follow-through and action.

Foundational to the GMI Summit was a data presentation by Secretary Holcombe, which laid out in very stark terms the policy challenges that Vermont is facing in its education system, namely:

1. How to put complex ideas into practice, at scale and across diverse contexts, in the absence of systems and in a climate of scarce resource?
2. If we could save money, simplify governance, get better performance data and invest in closing opportunity gaps, why don’t we?

GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE: CALL TO ACTION

While the GMI Summit brought forth many important perspectives and issues to light, one truth emerged:

Public education in Vermont has reached a turning point. We must move forward with solutions that give every Vermont student access to quality learning at a cost our state can afford.

Summit participants agreed that our challenge is not to define what quality looks like, because Vermont has already done a lot of work to define our expectations for high quality learning.

Instead, our challenge is to ensure that our system delivers quality learning in an equitable and affordable way.

The Roundtable and our close colleagues hope 2015 will be the year in which we stop talking about ~ and take meaningful action toward ~ the goals that Secretary Holcombe articulates:

- 1. Ensure that all children develop the skills they need to thrive in both their career and civic life;**
- 2. Provide this education in the most effective, accountable and affordable way; and,**
- 3. Assure equity of opportunities and outcomes across the state.**

The Call to Action report highlights the three highest priorities that participants felt would have the greatest potential to positively transform VT's public education ~ these include:

1. Simplified Governance;
2. Student-centered Learning; and,
3. Sustainable funding.

Simplified governance:

Vermont has 13 current forms of school governance; a complex organizational structure that is both fragmented and leads to uneven operational capacity.

In too many of our school districts, we do not have performance data on student outcomes because the size of the student population is too small; leading to limited accountability to students and their communities.

And, we do not have systems in place to improve teaching through coordinated professional development.

As student needs become more complex and the demands of our public education system have grown, our systems must become more adept at responding to those demands and better able to manage resources.

Student-centered Learning:

Quality learning shouldn't depend on what town a student lives in or what teacher she gets.

To succeed, students need access to new and more diverse and personalized learning opportunities. Yet, we see increasing inequity across the state driven by lack of scale.

Scale affects the breadth of opportunities that can be provided onsite for the same per pupil expenditure.

Financial Sustainability:

Vermont has one of the highest per pupil spending rates in the nation, yet our student population continues to decline, which prompts taxpayers to question why we continue to see rising costs that outpace our economy.

As in the current discussions around health care reform, it is time to closely examine the cost drivers of education and reallocate precious dollars to benefit students.

GREEN MOUNTAIN IMPERATIVE: NEXT STEPS

Using the coalition model, GMI Partners will establish a plan to continue serving as a Post-Summit convening body for accountability, communications and follow-through around the three priorities that emerged from the GMI Summit.

We will build public understanding of these issues by broadening statewide awareness and interest in the data, building on the momentum already begun.

And we will advocate for policy solutions that move the dial on the three priority areas.

Thank you for your interest. I'm happy to answer any questions.