

MEMORANDUM

TO: Senate Education Committee

FROM: Joel D. Cook, Executive Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: April 15, 2015

SUBJECT: Recommendations regarding changes to H.361

A. Achievement gap. The most important issue – addressing the learning of students from lower income families – is discussed but not really addressed in H.361. We appreciate the recent attention of the Committee to the issue. Schools can do some things, but not all things, to ameliorate the effects of student poverty. The way to eliminate the achievement gap in schools is found in elevating the social and economic standing of lower income families. It will not help narrow the achievement or “opportunity” gap to deprive lower wealth communities of funding assistance for their small schools.

Recommendation 1. Establish a commission, the purpose of which is to identify the components of social and public policy – including but certainly not limited to public education – that actually could be used to ameliorate the gross social and economic inequity in our society and in our state.

Recommendation 2. To both benefit families and mitigate public cost, plan for the incorporation of social service access and, perhaps, direct provision within the school setting.

Recommendation 3. If restricting small school grants is unavoidable, consider the relative wealth of communities receiving them, not just geographic isolation or other factors, in determining eligibility for continuing them.

B. The myth of the supervisory union. A key to strong public education in Vermont is the close tie our schools have to their local communities. That said, Vermonters have shown they can adapt to changes. Change driven by local community decision-making is change that is more likely to work. Change imposed from "Montpelier," however well-intended, is less likely to work.

Our SUs are fictions, creatures of the state existing, until recently, for the state's purposes of improved efficiency and little else.¹ If there is an entity legitimately subject to state-imposed mandates in this discussion, it is the SU. Importantly, SUs

¹ 16 V.S.A. § 261(a): "The state board...may regroup...or create...supervisory unions...to afford increased efficiency or greater convenience and economy and to facilitate K-12 curriculum planning and coordination..."

do not exist actually to provide education.² Like any bureaucracy, over time, SU central offices have simply expanded.

SUs have a host of administrative functions. No one has monitored their performance well. Instead, we bemoan the workload of a superintendent having to be responsive to multiple employing district boards, as though that "problem" is among the most important impediments to a highly functioning school system. And, the presumptive only "solution" is the elimination of locally elected school boards in favor of a single mega-board to direct local school policy.

SUs are not the central organizing construct of our children's education. That construct – literally and figuratively – is the school. The school is the students in classrooms with highly competent and trained adults, guided by a lead teacher – the principal – in concert with involved and engaged parents and the oversight of the community through an elected school board.³

Current SUs encompass as few as 200 and as many as more than 4000 students. Each SU performs the same administrative and business functions. Even without changing the number of superintendents, certainly there is serious redundancy in having 60 separate business offices, 60 distinct overseers of special education, 60 different curriculum directors, and the staffs associated with them.

There has got to be a way to achieve useful balance in this discussion.

Recommendation 4. Rather than worry about the number of school boards to which a superintendent in an SU must respond, change the definition of superintendent and duties of a school board to insulate the position of superintendent from being at the beck and call of multiple school district boards.

Recommendation 5. Reduce the number of superintendencies. There are calculable savings involved. There are multiple approaches to consider. The State Board of Education has always had all the authority needed to draw and, therefore, redraw SU boundaries.

Recommendation 6. Convert the encouragement of "virtual mergers" into state mandates.⁴ Assess the appropriate dimensions of the administrative functions

² While the SU, under Act 153, may now employ special education employees, special education remains provided by the schools within the districts encompassed by their SU.

³ We recognize the role of technology will need to be added here to avoid this description being labeled quaint or outdated.

⁴ So-called "virtual mergers" are in the section (§ 261a) labeled "Duties of a supervisory union board." Their purpose is to "promote the efficient use of financial and human

of the SU to determine the extent, if any, to which we can realize savings on "central office" administrative staffing.

C. SU budget approval. Voters have no direct say in the size of an SU's budget. The SU budget now includes direct instructional (special education) staff who still provide their services in district schools and, until Act 153, special education instruction costs were, of course, part of each district's budget. Providing direct voter approval of the SU budget is intuitively logical. We are concerned that voter disapproval of an SU budget is more likely than of a district budget, and the consequences for special needs children and the districts are predictably serious. Any SU budget approval method should take special account of this dynamic.

Recommendation 7. Change the SU budget approval process to one of (a) assessing member districts' costs associated with special education instruction (i.e., incorporate those costs in the instructional and other costs of each district's budget) and (b) providing for direct voter adoption of the balance.

D. What is the State's (Agency of Education's) role? All the governance change in the world will not "ensure" equal educational opportunities or compliance with state education quality standards. Those are the state's roles. To fulfill them, the AOE must have the real capacity to perform, and it doesn't. Conferring direct authority on the Secretary to conclude a school is not "financially viable" is unique and could lead to serious disruption.

Recommendation 8. Determine the actual staffing needed by the AOE and make sure it has the resources needed. (This recommendation is short, but it has important implications for any state-driven conduct regarding school districts.)

Recommendation 9. The "team" approach to school assessment can work, but, again, only if there are resources. As an example, for active teachers to participate, they will need both released time and, likely, credit toward relicensing for their participation.

Recommendation 10. Rather than confer immediate authority on the Secretary to conclude a school is not financially viable, either flesh out now the meaning of "not financially viable" or solicit from the Secretary a fleshing out of what the term would connote.

E. Mergers. We continue to believe the only truly workable approach to the creation of real pre-K – 12 systems will be voluntary. The best way to induce voluntary mergers is by (1) educating local communities about the value of doing so, (2) acknowledging the visceral connection between community and school, at least in many communities, and (3) providing incentives. If locally elected school boards are

resources" through "agreements with other supervisory unions jointly to provide any service or perform any duty..."

dissolved, there will be a need for a local entity to help guide and channel local community interest in participating in the life of their local school. Governance changes, as acknowledged in the bill and other drafts, need to address employment transitions for those actually educating our children.

Recommendation 11. Continue along the path of making pre-K – 12 systems the goal, but make consolidation of school districts advisable. Ask AOE to determine the districts where it believes consolidation is the most important and set about the task of helping those districts.

Recommendation 12. If district consolidation occurs, prepare to meet the need for a local body to supplant the school board.

Recommendation 13. Retain H.361's employment transition provisions (Sec 25 of the bill).

F. Principals. Turnover is a very serious problem. Consistent and good leadership at the school level is exceptionally important to a high functioning school. We cannot address principal turnover usefully by having boards and administrators study it. There are people who hold the key to understanding this problem: the entire pool from which principals emerge are active teachers and "lower level" administrators; former principals know why they left; and boards know what goes wrong, where a principal leaves for performance reasons. We are certain the reasons relatively few high performing teachers aspire to the job is the interaction of three factors: the demands of the position, in particular the diversion from instructional leadership; inadequate compensation; and the virtual absence of any job security. We can usefully test that assessment and address this problem by finding out from the people who know.

Recommendation 14. Commission research to assess why there is so much turnover among principals by, among other things, surveying the pool of potential principals about aspirations to become principals, by surveying former principals about why they left, and by surveying school boards for reasons behind retaining or releasing individuals from the position. Of course, current principals also have important contributions to this research.

G. Caps (\$ or ratios). Caps are a bad public policy device. There are multiple reasons you have heard from multiple sources. There is no example of their use resulting in improved education or other affected public services. There are multiple examples where their use has led to the tanking of service quality. The state is in the middle of implementing changes in the "excess spending threshold" and does not even know their impact.

Recommendation 15. Do not adopt caps.

H. Language. How we describe the issues affects how we think about them.

Describing programs as "cost drivers" is rarely accurate. The "best example": special education is not a cost driver. The cost driver leading to significant special education costs is the ever-increasing needs of our student population. The needs of our children are the cost driver. Less importantly, the cost of audits is not the cost driver. The cost driver is the requirement to conduct audits locally and frequently.

Recommendation 16. Use "cost driver" to describe the reason for the program or activity, not the program or activity.

Describing facilities and people as "resources" and their movement as "deployment" is patently offensive, at least to the people.

Recommendation 17. In describing the real people who do the work of educating our children, use the term "people" or "educators" or "employees," not "resources." "Deployment" feels quasi-militaristic: "assignment" or "transfer," depending on context, might work better.

Describing pre-K – 12 education systems as "integrated" may be accurate, but for more than a half-century, "integrated education systems" has had an almost exclusively civil rights connotation, and appropriately so.

Recommendation 18. Find an acceptable alternative to "integrated" in describing pre-K – 12 systems: "unified" or "cohesive" might work. So might, simply, "pre-K – 12 systems."