

Comments on Senate Version from April 17, 2015
Vermont School Boards Association
April 21, 2014

Section 2 Preferred Education Governance Structure

The section on Preferred Governance Structure lays out the long-term vision of the future. It becomes the basis for the “transition to sustainable governance structures” at the end of the bill. Assuming that we will continue to respect the current tuitioning patterns in Vermont, we must be willing to accept the existence of Supervisory Unions as a legitimate feature of our system. And we should have high expectations for them. The current supervisory union language in section 2(b) states that “the supervisory union has the smallest number of member school districts practicable, achieved wherever possible by the merger of districts with similar operating and tuitioning patterns.” This implies, up front, that towns like Stamford, Readsboro, and Halifax would be combined as a single district within a broader supervisory union—as would Strafford, Sharon, and Stockbridge—as would Bakersfield, Berkshire, and Montgomery. If a region proposes to remain a supervisory union, the focus should be on how they will achieve the outcomes, not on a number internal forces collapsing of small town school districts.

Section 2(b) should be modified to read:

Supervisory union. A single prekindergarten-grade 12 district as envisioned in subsection (a) of this section may not be possible or the best model to achieve Vermont’s education goals in all regions of the State. In such situations, a supervisory union composed of multiple member districts, each with its separate school board, can meet the State’s goals if:

1. The member districts are collectively responsible for the education of all PreK-12 students residing in the supervisory union.
2. The SU operates with structures and protocols to assure efficient operation that provides for economies of scale and flexible management of staff resources.
3. The SU operates in a manner that allows for leadership to focus on students and schools and less on meeting attendance.

Section 6 Accelerated Merger

The concept of enhanced incentives is a good one to elicit action. The problem with the proposed language is that in reality very few districts will be able to take advantage of them.

The incentives, with a one-year time frame, may be fine for districts that are fairly simple in their structure and can act quickly, but it is not really available to complex districts—and ¾ of supervisory unions have a complex mix of choice and non-choice. The new incentives will be paid for out of the education fund, reducing taxes for the receiving regions, while increasing taxes in the complex regions that really can't take advantage of it, especially within a one-year period. This program should be rethought to provide more equal access or the incentives should have a different funding source.

Section 14 Declining Enrollment

There is general agreement that compounding protections for declining enrollment over time is not a sound policy. The House version of the bill phases out the ADM Hold Harmless provision, but keeps in place an annual 3.5% maximum reduction from the actual of one year to the actual of the following year. Section 14 of this bill would eliminate the entire protection for most districts, which is too severe.

Section 15 Current Incentives for Joint Activity

These incentives have been in place since 2012 with the passage of H 156. These supports and incentives, in current law, are available until July 1, 2017. It would be unfortunate to eliminate these supports and incentives effective December 31, simply because the general assembly now prefers people to move toward Supervisory Districts. Vermont will continue to have a number of Supervisory Unions. If we expect them to continue to improve their overall functioning, they need ongoing supports to do so. Do not shorten the dates of availability.

Section 25 Fiscal Year 2021; Transition to Sustainable Governance Structures

Section 2 says that by 2021 the State Board would create a plan that would require everyone to go into 2(a) (supervisory district). This is not possible, nor is it desirable. If we are going to say at the start of the bill—you can choose either a supervisory union or a supervisory district—we can't come back five years later and say you can't choose the supervisory union. We strongly urge you to add 2(b) after each reference to 2(a).

Section 26 Education Technical Assistant

This section allows the Agency of Education to hire one new position to assist with the implementation of this bill. This bill is designed to promote a major change in one of Vermont's largest public systems. Successful implementation will require adequate staffing at the Agency and the State Board to support the work and the process. One position is insufficient.