

Senate Education Committee
Testimony on H.361
Steve Dale, Vermont School Boards Association
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Introduction

The VSBA speaks organizationally through our resolutions and through actions of our board. It is critical that you all understand that we have 1450 individuals serving on over 300 boards. I can tell you that there are a wide range of views on this subject. There are some who are enthusiastic supporters of creative action and there are others who will adamantly oppose whatever you do. As you proceed with a specific bill, you will continue to hear a range of views from our members.

I am here today because our organization and its leadership believe that school boards must be part of the solution. We cannot simply say, “leave us alone”. Education in Vermont is a joint endeavor with you all setting policy and providing the financing framework and with local boards assuring that great education is delivered locally at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

There are two primary parts of H361 that I would like to discuss. Section 27-28 CAPS—and Section 17 Integrated Education Systems.

I. Property Tax Relief in the Short-Run

We understand the need for property tax relief and the associated rise in education costs that have continued to apply upward pressure and we have suggestions for addressing those issues.

Caps are a bad idea:

- *They impose a hard spending cap on all districts regardless of whether they are high or low spenders, allowing twice the spending increase for the highest spenders in Vermont as for lower spenders.*
- *They do not recognize the complexity and variability of Vermont's local budgets. For example, some towns only tuition students and must, by law, pay what they are charged. What happens if tuitions are increased more than 1.5%?*
- *They do not recognize the variable demands on districts. For example, a number of special education students may move into a particular district.*
- *They do not recognize the difference in school facilities. Some districts have already invested in facility improvements. Those who have not will be prevented from doing so or may not be able to afford necessary maintenance.*
- *They negate the voice of the local electorate. Vermonters approved 92% of the budgets put before them on Town Meeting Day. A substantial portion of the 226 budgets approved would have been disallowed under the cap provision. This is the ultimate slap in the face to local democracy in Vermont.*
- *The bottom line is that they can cause serious harm to education in particular schools for particular children. Up here, it all looks like "clamping down on education costs". Out there, there are real schools, real children, and real parents who will know that a program was cut or a roof is leaking.*

We have been making a number of alternative suggestions.

Go over Hand Out "Tangible Tax Relief"

II. Reactions to Section 17 of the Bill: Integrated Education Systems

This is the section of the bill that addresses equity, quality, and cost over the long-run. We generally support the direction of this section. In so doing, we embrace three basic truths.

- Our system is better than most by most indicators.
- Vermont is a special place. We love our small and intimate communities. We operate on a scale that respects the dignity of each individual. We must be sure that our solutions have fundamental respect for those values, recognizing that there are many ways to reflect that respect.
- We must be honest about our challenges and be willing to address them. You have seen the data. You know the problems. We have growing disparity in what we are able to provide for our students from region to region. We are under increasing pressure from state and federal mandates. We have higher expectations than ever of our schools to engage every child in a personalized PreK-12 education. And our students bring to school increasing challenges which require more extensive supports and more substantial interventions. The ability to respond to these pressures effectively and efficiently has been seriously affected by the relentless drop in the number of children in Vermont and by our inability to fundamentally alter our system in response. Our citizens are telling us that our cost per-student trend line needs to change. ***Board members, this past fall, in six meetings held around the state told us that to respond to this situation, we***

must be better able to deploy staff nimbly and must be able to achieve somewhat greater scale. There is substantial openness to change if done correctly.

A. The VSBA/VSA Proposal

Early in the session, the VSBA and the VSBA came to you and made a proposal for how to achieve these kinds of objectives. Our proposal made very clear that any plan needed to be based on the following public policy principals:

- ***Solutions must be focused on achieving outcomes—greater equity, efficiency and quality.***
- ***Solutions must allow districts to more flexibly deploy resources—key theme from our regional meetings.***
- ***Solutions should not assume one size fits all***—The reality of Vermont’s districts and the variety of choice configurations makes a simple solution impossible, unless this body wants to take on the choice issue. Several weeks ago I invited in four districts to share their complexities and their possibilities.
- ***Solutions must allow local communities to design and implement their own structural change.***
- ***Structural changes should be encouraged through a mix of incentives and disincentives.*** The incentives should be clear and enticing and should include meaningful construction aid, technology aid, and tax incentives. Negative consequences such as higher local tax rates should not be the sole lever to induce structural change.

- ***Solutions should be crafted to retain strong community connections.*** Changes need to address the need for nimble deployment of resources, somewhat greater scale and achievement of greater equity in our system, but cannot be on a scale that disconnects education from the citizenry. We oppose large, county-wide solutions.

We believe that section 17 is generally aligned with these principals.

B. Brief Analysis of H 361, SECTION 17

The short version of our analysis of this section of the bill was sent out to our membership just before town meeting. It is included below.

Creation of Pre-K-12 Education Systems

For the past few years, we have engaged with our members around the need to respond to issues around education equity and cost. At meetings this fall, we heard again and again about the need for somewhat greater scale and the ability to deploy staff resources more flexibly. The committee bill seeks to address these issues.

The bill lays out an overall concept for “PreK-12 Education Systems” that would be on a scale of the area covered by a supervisory union. This size and scope is reasonable, keeping education oversight in close proximity to local communities. The committee has steered clear of multiple proposals to move toward countywide systems. This section of the bill, Section 17, would require that each local district not function as a separate unit unto itself, but as part of a system that is responsible for the education of children across a somewhat larger area, able to deploy staff resources more flexibly to assure that all children get a great education at a reasonable cost. The bill encourages districts to merge into a single unit, but allows for systems to be overseen by a single board or by multiple boards operating in an integrated fashion. That feature recognizes that “one size can’t fit all”—that our communities are very diverse and that we have very complex blends of towns that operate schools and provide school choice. The bill protects the 91 towns that currently have “choice” as part of their delivery system.

There are a number of incentives and disincentives for action.

C. Specific Changes Recommended

- New Section 17 (c) (1) Size and Structure

The specific size can be debated. We had preferred 1000, but as long as a waiver exists, it may be fine.

- In addition, we support your section 10, the Governor's proposal for a results-oriented approach using an assessment system to be implemented by the Agency of Education. If districts are very low in their educational performance or very high in their costs, an intervention can occur which could include structural realignment.

D. All Deadlines and Overall Ability to Implement

The big challenge in this section will be facing honestly the ability of the Agency of Education, the State Board, and the districts to implement the policy change.

The key to any major system change is the ability to translate policy into effective implementation. This process will require the timely establishment of guidelines for assessing PreK-12 Education Systems. We must be sure that districts will have the time to develop relationships and proposals. And the Agency of Education must have the capacity to establish and implement clear processes and procedures and to provide timely legal, technical, and data support to help districts prepare for and to implement the required changes. The State Board of Education must be prepared to consider and approve many proposals in an effective, thoughtful, and timely way.

Additional thought should be given to the details and to carefully reviewing every deadline in the bill.

The Agency must be properly equipped to do its work in the timeframes required.

III. Comments on the Senate Version

Sec. 1

(a)-(c) are helpful.

(d) Have concerns about the concept of “Expanded Supervisory Unions”—some are already quite large. You might want to set a floor of 1000 or 1100, but don’t push people together in larger SUs. We should also further define the responsibility of an SU in the world of PreK-12 Education Systems. It must be responsible for education of all children in the region, assure the efficient deployment of resources, and promote the creation of joint agreements, joint contracts, and possible mergers within to achieve the objectives.

Sec. 2

(a) Size--Should be the same for both SDs and SUs.

(b) Process— Like the clarity of the process- choose 1, 2, or 3, but make the choice be in the interest of creating integrated “preK-12 education systems”. Do not put the focus on an option being to “retain its current governance structure”. Keep the focus on how a multi-board option will allow for the achievement of the outcomes.

(d) Incentives—

PreK-12 District-- like substantial incentives.

Multi-Board Option-- \$20,000 might be light

(h) School Closure-- good section