

## **Ken Page's Testimony on Behalf of the Vermont Principals' Association regarding School Discipline**

**Good afternoon. I am Ken Page, Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. I have come today to complement the testimony of my colleague Emily Simmons from the School Boards Association and to provide some context, because I believe that I bring actual school experience as both a teacher and principal in Vermont's elementary, middle and high schools where I worked for 36 years. Additionally, this is my seventh year as the VPA Director.**

**When S. 194 was introduced the other day, this committee spent some time actually trying to define the problem. Are there too many suspensions? Are some students excluded at proportionally higher rates than others? Are some students treated unfairly? Do we have good and reliable data? Is this a training issue for school principals? Should we be altering the school suspension laws?**

**The answers to these questions and to others you will generate are, in my opinion, mostly a matter of perspective. It all depends on one's point of view. Some groups who have come before you are solely looking at a single student at a time and if the cases before them seem unfair or adversely affect one group more than another. I applaud their efforts to insure that we don't discriminate or let bias affect our decisions.**

**However, other groups, such as school principals, have a responsibility to look at the safety of all students and, most of all, want to in create and sustain an environment that is safe and conducive for all to learn.**

**These two points of view don't have to be mutually exclusive. I sure don't mean to sound as if I know all there is to know about school discipline. In testimony before this committee, there have been very valuable contributions from Vermont Legal Aid, Vermont ACLU, The Vermont Agency of Education and several others. You have even have heard of some very promising practices such as PBiS and Restorative Justice.**

**As Senators Baruth said on Tuesday, it is key that you are clear what specific problem you are addressing, and since Vermont's exclusion numbers are low compared to national numbers why it is advisable for you to tell the Agency of Education that this problem must to be addressed now. He seemed to be advocating for a limited scope for the bill. And Senator Cummings reminded the committee that there was simply was no money for any new initiative.**

**As my colleague Emily Simmons has pointed out the current statute regarding suspensions and expulsions serves us very well. It is carefully worded to give students the opportunity to tell their side of the story, for administrators to keep their schools safe, and for parents and staff to know that they too will be safe in school.**

**I believe that many valid points have been made by those who have reviewed and studied national figures on student exclusion. We, meaning Vermont's principals, don't have any difficulty in trying to make a good system even better or in helping our school principals**

to recognize biases and to examine practices before excluding students from instruction and from school.

You have heard me say many times that principals are the “keepers of the school climate.” Our principals work very hard to manage and lead their communities forward toward higher levels of both behavior and learning.

As you may know, schools are required to have school discipline policies, which are developed at the school and supervisory union level. As Emily pointed out, when principals are investigating behavior infractions, they are required to hear the student’s side of the story (due process) before meting out consequences, which most often are dealt with effectively in school and require staff time and expertise to help students work through the issues. If, on rare occasions, after hearing the student’s side of the story (usually with a parent present), the principal decides to suspend, the student is then given a copy of the discipline policy along with the schools rules. Very often, but not always, students get schoolwork and try to keep up with their assignments.

So, what’s to be done with this bill and others regarding school discipline? I sure don’t believe that people’s views about uneven consequences or a perceived unequal treatment of students should be ignored. Or that everything is just fine in schools today. In fact it is not. Principals tell me that never before have they seen so many students particularly younger students who have experienced traumatic events on a regular basis, such as a student who scream for extended periods and who is totally unavailable for learning, or of a case I heard of this week of a six year old student who went to the healthy snack drawer, got the knife for cutting up snacks and attacked a fellow six year old because he was mad at him. He also attacked staff and the principal refusing to give up the knife. Sadly, the student had to be suspended to keep himself and others safe while the school team developed an alternative educational placement. And, following word of the incident, several parents of first graders expressed serious reservations about having their children in a class with a violent student. In fact, even the teacher who is pregnant says she simply can’t be in such an environment. So, what’s a principal to do?

On Tuesday, this committee was amazed that even a very young child could get suspended. Well, it’s true. And, by the way, the school, in trying to decipher the problem worked with the parents and discovered that opiate addiction was a contributing factor.

And yesterday, a principal mentor wrote to me about his discussion with a first-year principal about a discipline challenge she had in her school. He wrote:

*“Put in the most graphic way, if a 5th grader threatens to ‘castrate’ another 5th grader (an actual case from the current week in her school), shouldn’t some of our programmatic attention go to empowering the ‘victim’ to deal with this kind stuff rather than just leaving them in fear and/or bad dreams, or worse yet, with the realization that adults really can’t do anything about this cause the kid is back in their class a some point in the future?”*

So, what’s the answer? Does S. 194 address the problem, or simply make it more complicated? Are we comfortable that this is enough? Will changing suspension requirements really help school officials to help build positive school climates?

**I am skeptical of this less-than-complete approach.**

**I believe that you should charge groups who have an interest in these issues assembled in this room to find common ground. If suspension laws need to be changed, then we should be working together to make reasonable changes and to not lose sight of our prime goal, to keep all students safe. If there is a need for training for educators on recognizing bias and looking at the decisions they make, then we should do this. If education and human services agencies worked more closely, would we be able to effectively deal with the many mental health crises that occur in the primary grades?**

**I am hoping that you will decide that your approach needs to be systemic and not reactive. I am hoping that you will dig even deeper to get to the root cause. I am hoping that you will ask all of us involved to wrap our arms around a solution that we all can live with that will inevitably result in a win for all---especially the students.**

**I will commit my effort and VPA's effort to work on such an initiative led by our very capable, yet very under-staffed Vermont Agency of Education. Thank you for your attention to the many issues involving school climate and school safety.**