

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Vermont's school principals. Since the report Kicked Out primarily refers to the effects of kids being suspended from school and since by law, only school principals can suspend students from school, it seems fitting that school principals are given the opportunity to weigh in on this proposed legislation.

Incidentally, it is important to note that not a single school principal was involved with the creation of the Kicked Out report and of the 15-member study commission named in S. 67, only two of the fifteen members are principals. I have heard from several principals about this. As one principal wrote: *"I am very disturbed that the data gathered without true understanding of the sources, or the methods with which it is gathered is being used to create legislation."*

I am here to tell you that principals take their responsibility very seriously and use the authority of suspending a student very sparingly, both to give a consequence for a serious student infraction to protect the other members of the student body and staff from danger or physical harm.

I applaud Jay Diaz and Vermont Legal Aid, as well as the bill's sponsors Senator Sears, Senator Campion and Senator McCormack for looking at individual rights and possible abuses by those of us in positions of authority. Yet, I am here to caution you to be careful in enacting another study when your Agency of Education has very promising initiatives already in place, as well as a secretary-designated task force, which looks at hazing, harassment and bullying.

By the way, before I say more about the duties of the principals regarding school suspensions and in keeping their schools safe, I first want to talk to you about the math in the Kicked Out report.

Senators: It is very concerning when any child is suspended from school. But...let's not be fooled by statistics.

So, let's do the math here: There are approximately 78,000 students in Vermont schools. If you multiply this times 175 days in a school year, you will get the total number of student days in a school year which is 13,650,000 student days. Now take the total number of days Vermont students are suspended from school as cited by the Kicked Out report, which is 8000. If you divide this by the total number of days, you will get a very small decimal .000586. You multiply this by 100, to get a percentage which is .0586%. The result:

Of the total number of days all Vermont students go to school, only a bit more than than one half of 1% of total student days were days when students were suspended. Or, stated another way: for over 99% of the total number of days, students were not suspended.

About the 8000 days

Concerning? "Sure"

Alarming? "No"

Room for Discussion: "Of course!"

By the way, I am curious to know if anyone else in this room today is certified to suspend, or has ever suspended a child from school? For your information, here are the steps a principal follows:

After doing a school internal investigation which can mean talking with one or more students, the classroom teacher and other adults in the area where the incident occurred, the next step is to call a parent, which may require the parent to leave work, to come to school to meet with their child and the principal; then the principal gives the student a chance to give his or her side of the story (also called due process) in front of a parent: then the principal gives a copy of the school's discipline policy to the student and parent and then as gives or sends a communication in writing informing parents of their child's suspension; then, the principal confidentially informs each of the student's teachers and coaches; after that, the principal set up a re-entry plan following the suspension; the principal then alerts the guidance counselor and the student's teacher advisor of the suspension and the possible impact on the student's learning and social-emotional behavior; and, when the suspension is up, the principal attends a reentry meeting with the student, the parent and often with school staff.

So, even if you aren't a principal, I bet that you can hear that suspensions are complicated and involve a lot of extra work for the student, the parent and for the school staff. In order to develop positive, respectful and safe environments, principals and their staff work hard to help students get along and to problem-solve when things go wrong. Certainly, having been a principal over 20 years, I can say with assurance that principals are not in the business of suspending students without good cause.

For me, there were only two reasons why I would send a student home: first, the student had created an unsafe situation for the other students and staff in the school and second, the issue had risen to the point that it was absolutely necessary to insure that the student was out of school for the rest of this day in order to both help that student, to set up a meeting with parents and to give our staff an opportunity to set up alternative arrangements or plans. For me, rarely was a suspension out-of-school more than one day, and even rarer still was it that a student would be suspended for the maximum number of days, which is 10.

Senators: The only position of the principals association can and should take is to **NOT** be **FOR** or against this legislation that looks at suspension, but instead to to be **WITH** any groups who are looking at ways to help students to be more successful in school and in life.

But, with so much good work being done by the BEST (**BUILDING EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR TEACHING STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES**) team in schools, many of them using the SWIS (**School Wide Information System**) school data system, and by the AOE, to closely examine students' challenging behaviors and then to respond by developing positive school climates for learning, *my association and I question the value of a separate bill that proposes to study the issue four times an year with 15 people, most who are not very familiar with how school or principals operate, and to generate a report for the legislature that enumerates yet again many of the problems we already know about now.*

So, should the legislation advance and eventually be made law, a year from now, when the report concludes there are issues to be worked on in Vermont schools, I can only imagine your committee turning right back to the Agency of Education to ask them to work with schools, principals and superintendents to address these issues. So, what's the point?

Senators: as you know from the report, there *are* valid points raised about the lack of a reliable data system. I agree. Principals will tell you that the Agency of Education data is inconsistent, that the Agency's CIRIS **Combined Incident Reporting Software** data system collection system is

ineffective and that many if not most schools are having much more success with the SWIS data collection system.

So, although I question the report's use of old and unreliable data, I believe that the authors do make some valid conclusions at the end of the report:

- YES: Suspension from school is not the answer- we administrators must work to limit disciplinary exclusion and the effects that come from it;
- YES: students should be allowed to work on schoolwork while suspended (*in fact I must tell you I do not know of a single school; who prohibits students from working on school work while suspended*);
- YES, students and schools need good lessons on the value of due process and;
- YES, discipline reporting must be accurate and timely.

But, Senators, I know you're surely not surprised to learn that what happens in school can affect what later occurs later in life since schools are microcosms of any community: In schools and in school systems, we have students who are from age 5 to age 18, or about a 13-year span. And as they grow up and have experiences, this 13-year age span of students will experience many successes and many failures in their lives, just like all of us. Therefore, we should all not be surprised that our early experiences shape who we become. However, taken alone, the student suspensions don't directly lead to life's successes or failures and these school suspensions alone don't cause one to take a wrong path.

The school administrator is the one person in the building who looks at the entire learning environment for all of the students, is the keeper of the school climate, and who holds students accountable for following rules. In so doing, he or she sometimes decides to suspend a student and also then, works diligently with staff and parents to put systems in place to both maintain a healthy environment and to help those same students reintegrate back into the learning environment and to get moving forward in a positive way.

So, my plea is that we use the Kicked Out report to help us to improve our system, that principals and superintendents work with teachers and others to be aware of the effect that some consequences have on students, and that we all work to insure that we develop a respectful learning environment.

As legislators, YOU will have to decide if this issue has risen to the level of needing more study. I, personally, do not believe that it does. With less than one half of 1% of Vermont students suspended from school, I doubt you will say that we have major system problems here in Vermont. And, as I said, I am aware of many positive Vermont AOE initiatives occurring right now to address some of the conclusions from the report.

At the very least, I would hope that you would be encouraging the authors of the report to join forces with those in education who are actively working on these issues, to make our schools and learning environments even better than they are now.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. I pledge our leaders' efforts and to work on problems raised by this report. Should you want to hear from additional witnesses, I am sure that I can ask other principals to weigh in on these important issues. I am also happy to answer any questions you may have.