

Ken Page's testimony on behalf of the Vermont Principals' Association regarding changes being considered to current bullying laws and procedures, March 22, 2016

My name is Ken Page, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. As you know from my previous testimony, I have spent my entire career of almost 43 years working as a teacher, principal and state executive director. I currently serve also on the statewide secretary-of-education task force on hazing, harassment and bullying. My remarks today are mostly, however, from the school principals' points of view.

From what I can tell, H. 830 is primarily in front of the House Education Committee because of a very unfortunate sports-related situation at a northern Vermont high school where a player had a very difficult time with her teammates, the coach, and the school administration. I was in the House Education Committee last week when a parent talked about the very difficult situation and all that ensued. I know that the case is in the hands of an independent reviewer, and so it would not be proper to comment about the particulars of this case. Nor do I want to appear to be defending any adult's action in this case because I simply do not have the standing in this matter or the right to do so. My concern is, however, about the lack of process, and in particular, what I believe to be the usual ways conflicts are resolved in schools.

When I spoke to Senator Cummings last week, she asked me if I would address this question:

"Should the Senate Education Committee be investigating changes to the current bullying statute?"

Knowing that new Hazing, Harassment and Bullying policy and procedures have just been adopted in May of 2015, that school boards throughout the state have just adopted this new policy, and that designated employees are now undergoing trainings which have a common set of procedures statewide, my answer to the question is an unequivocal "no."

Besides, as the AOE legal counsel states, additional changes are not needed and if districts are required to pay tuition for students to attend another school, this would create huge burdens for school districts by undermining the school board's ability to manage their school affairs. He also states that "school administrators and designated employees are acting earnestly and in good faith in virtually all cases about which the Agency has cause to inquire, or knows about."

But, what is to be done about the issue that has prompted this concern?

Without getting into the specific details of the case, I have been in touch with the administration of the school involved. Applying what I know from my 21 years as a school principal, I asked if this case went through the usual conflict resolution steps: If no satisfaction is achieved at the school level, the case moves to the district superintendent of schools; if no satisfaction at this level, the case goes to the school board.

What I heard from the parent in House Education last week, is that she felt trapped with regard to getting people to understand the issues and, in her opinion had absolutely no place to turn.

How sad.

It is heart breaking to hear of a case where a child's education is so seriously disrupted that the parents would unilaterally want to move their child to another school.

Likewise, it also disheartening to know that the adults in the case, and, I mean all of the adults, could not put aside their differences and find a reasonable solution to their thorny issues.

I must however, conclude that there would have been a different outcome had the case made its way through the usual conflict resolution process of principal to superintendent to school board.

My work on the Hazing, Harassment and Bullying Task force has given me new insights into the problems. It has pointed out that few if any bus drivers get sufficient training in managing bullying incidents (and we've started to rectify this); it has told me that school staffs are woefully unprepared to handle cyberbullying issues; it has told me that all staff, including coaches, paraprofessionals and regular school volunteers can use training in bullying and harassment too. And even though it appears that older students don't need supervision all the time, they actually do need regular adult presence to know how to behave. This means in locker rooms, in the gym, waiting for busses and during down time.

So, although I am entirely sympathetic to parents wanting the best for their children, I also know that the Vermont law in Title 16 1161a says that each school will have a comprehensive plan for dealing with student misbehavior. In essence, we have relegated student behavior and management to be a local control issue. Does it make any sense, accordingly, to think that we should solve issues like this at the state government level?

I just don't think so.

I would urge the Senate Education Committee to carefully consider if there is compelling evidence to indicate that the current laws, policies and procedures are not working statewide before enacting, yet another law, or a tweak of the law which, may have serious consequences, financial and otherwise, and, most of all, as we know will never substitute for reasonable adults getting together to talk and solve problems on behalf of their children.

Thank you.