

Stephan Dale 1/16/15

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Dear Vermont School Board Member,

This year's legislative session has seen increased interest in education leadership and governance, fueled by concerns about maintaining education quality, assuring greater equity of opportunity for students across the state, and addressing the long-term sustainability of our funding system. It is our belief that there is a high likelihood that some type of legislation will pass in this legislative session.

Faced with this likelihood, the VSBA board, 29 local school board members from 29 different boards, has spent considerable time evaluating this issue in light of the goals we established in our Agenda for a World-Class Education System. We believe that there are compelling reasons for change, in the interests of students and taxpayers. We also believe that any change that occurs must be designed in a way that supports our deep community values. School boards are in the best position to inform this process and must be fully engaged in this effort. If we stand on the sidelines of this debate, or take a stand staunchly in opposition, we substantially reduce the opportunity to influence the outcome. This letter outlines our thinking on this subject. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions as this discussion unfolds over the next three months.

In 1892, Vermont underwent a dramatic change in the structure of education. In a single act, the legislature moved Vermont from a state with 2500 schools, each with its own school board, to a state with fewer than 300 local boards. After more than a century of governance centered around hamlets and rural cross-roads, based on the reality that children walked to school and most-often lived their lives on or near the family farm, Vermont adjusted its organization of education to adapt to a world that was opening up due to revolutions in transportation and communication. At the time, town-based districts offered broader opportunities for children at a more reasonable price.

In the 1960's, the advent of the interstate highway system brought an influx of new residents to Vermont. This increase in population came at a time when the launch of Sputnik brought intense attention to the need for advances in science and math instruction. In response, Vermont chose to create a number of union high schools. By combining efforts across neighboring towns, Vermonters were able to ensure their children went to schools equipped with modern laboratories, high quality athletic facilities and auditoriums. Larger schools allowed for a more robust curriculum with greater variety of opportunity for students. And working together meant Vermonters could provide these benefits far more efficiently than if they were trying to duplicate similar facilities and educational resources in every town in Vermont.

Vermont is once again at a threshold moment with respect to its education governance system. Multiple forces are converging to challenge us again to re-think our structure for education.

1. Our schools have to be able to prepare our children to thrive in the world that awaits them. To ensure that all of our children and future generations can acquire the knowledge and skills essential to succeed in a global and technological world and develop their individual talents, they need access to new, broader, more diverse and personalized learning opportunities. This is our collective commitment and one that we cannot shy away from. We are no longer simply preparing our children for life and work within the borders of a town but for success in their region, state, nation and beyond.
2. Our current cost structure is pushing the limits of sustainability and beginning to affect quality. This year, the majority of school districts are facing a tax increase that goes well beyond any increase in the proposed district budget, largely because, over time, per pupil spending statewide has increased with the steady fall in student population. In many of our smaller districts, we simply do not have the ability to flexibly deploy resources to assure the highest quality education at a reasonable cost. The shrinking of student population is resulting in reduced program opportunities for students. This situation is likely to get worse as the legislature contemplates funding changes in protections for small schools.
3. We have a leadership crisis. A school board is the community's agent for assuring our children receive an excellent education at a reasonable cost. The board is accountable to the community to articulate a clear vision, secure needed resources and monitor effectiveness, but boards rely on great administrators to lead staff and carry out all operational functions. We must attract and retain top quality leaders if we are to achieve our education goals. This year, at least 16 superintendents in Vermont – 25% - will leave their jobs. The pool of high quality candidates is very shallow, jeopardizing our ability to assure excellence.
4. Our current governance system of supervisory unions is not designed for strong accountability. It was designed in 1912 as a system for teacher supervision and over time has morphed into our primary unit of education management. However, the structure does not promote accountability, with a superintendent receiving guidance from as many as 13 boards. As SU budgets have grown with the centralization of special education, transportation and other services, they have become less accountable to voters who don't act directly on these budgets.

In response to these realities, the political winds have begun to blow in the direction of change. Driven both by a desire to improve education opportunities and by the political necessity to bend the education cost curve, there are strong forces moving toward making substantial changes to our system of education governance. A proposal to create preK-12 education

systems is beginning to take shape in the General Assembly, and it has the support of a wide array of stakeholders.

The VSBA board has carefully considered these issues and agrees broadly that they must be addressed. Despite the fact that our education system performs quite well relative to others, we cannot be satisfied when we are not adequately engaging every student in a world-class education, when opportunities to do so vary widely across the state, and when financial uncertainty threatens to undermine our system. School boards exist to assure a high quality education for every child and great value for taxpayers. Our collective focus must be on the achievement of those goals—even if it means change for us as important community bodies.

Our principles in participating in this effort will be as follows:

1. Any new reality must serve the interests of our two primary constituents—students and taxpayers. Our focus must be on outcomes for students and stability for taxpayers. We support the notion of moving, over time, from supervisory unions to preK-12 education systems that will:

- Engage every student in a world-class education and create a broader array of learning opportunities at a time of limited resources.
- Create a cost structure which provides for the efficient and flexible deployment of resources to expand and sustain student opportunities, assure greater equity among students and across schools, and create greater stability in tax rates for taxpayers.
- Attract and retain outstanding education leadership. Our current turnover rate is far too high and the pool of interested candidates far too shallow.
- Be more accountable for results. School superintendents need clear policy guidance from a cohesive board and need to be accountable for results. Unlike current supervisory union budgets, expenditure plans need to be accountable to taxpayers.

2. Vermont must maintain its commitment to strong communities and a strong “locally-owned” education system. Vermont is not just a place to live and work—it is a way of life. Many of us have chosen to live here because of its smallness and the ability to have an impact on the quality of life and the strength of community. For many, the school is the heart of the community. As we wrestle with the forces driving change, we must assure that we respect our fundamental values of smallness, community, and concern for others. We expect that any new system will:

- Create a formal vehicle to maintain strong ties between our schools and our communities
- Include protections against unwanted school closures

- Ensure representation from each town on any new governing body
3. Vermont's school boards must be central to helping guide the transition to a new reality. They must assure there is no disruption in educational quality for students as system change occurs. Boards will play a leadership role in the development of plans affecting their communities and through the implementation period. Boards will be key communicators in this effort – both to their communities and to policymakers. We will support a change process that:
- Provides the opportunity for local communities and regions to figure this out first, knowing that there is likely to be a time limit on creating regional pre-K-12 systems. Local boards and local communities must have the opportunity to come together to design a future that can work - given community preferences, historical connections, geography, and current education-delivery patterns.
  - Provides enough time to assure that this can all be done well. Change of this magnitude will require adjustments in the employment contracts of superintendents, substantial changes to collective bargaining agreements, the management of debt, and changes in the make-up and operations of school boards.
  - Assures strong board voice in the design of the plan and process. Local boards will be affected by any kind of dramatic change at a level far greater than any other group. Board support will be essential to the success of this effort and will require confidence that community values will be respected in this process.

The VSBA board is anxious to involve our full membership in this discussion. To that end, we will be distributing information via video and in writing to assure that all of our members understand the basic issues at play here. We also are considering various approaches to direct conversation within a fairly compressed timeline. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions on how to best connect.

We believe that this effort can be guided to serve a very useful purpose for students and taxpayers. We can address our challenges while maintaining and strengthening small schools and local communities and still having more board members per student than any other state in the nation—maintaining our very special community fabric and valued way of life.

Sincerely,

John Fike, VSBA President, Reading School Board  
Steve Dale, Executive Director, Vermont School Boards Association