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To: House Education Committee
From: Nicole L. Mace, Executive Director
Re: UVM Special Education Funding Study
Date: January 12, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the UVM Special Education Funding Study. The Vermont School Boards Association has had a resolution for several years calling for a study of the current methodology for funding special education. The study conducted by Professor Kolbe includes a great deal of useful data and analysis that, coupled with the District Management Group report, indicate that we have significant opportunities to adjust policy and practice in order to provide better services for children at a lower cost.

Professor Kolbe was clear in her testimony that current funding levels for special education reflects current practice. Transitioning to a new funding model for special education must be accompanied by changes in special education practices. That work must be supported by an Agency of Education that has the staffing and resources necessary to provide ongoing technical assistance to districts.

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The VSBA board has invited the Agency of Education to come to its board meeting in February in order to better understand the Agency's approach to realigning its supports in order to conform with the recommendations of these reports. The VSBA has had and continues to have concerns about staffing capacity at the Agency of Education. That capacity must be addressed as part of any significant shift in funding designed to drive changes in practice.

The UVM study indicates that, in order to be done well, this transition must occur over a five-year period. We concur with the VCSEA that further analysis by practitioners and representatives from the AOE is essential prior to the legislature responding to adjust the formula. The report contains a tremendous amount of useful information and analysis that requires examination and review in order to understand which models and simulations

are best for Vermont and the implications of such a shift. This includes the impact of moving to a census based model on small, rural districts.

Further study would also allow for thorough examination of the appropriate level of funding for a census model. No matter the source of funding, districts are obligated to provide the services called for in an IEP. A move to a census based model that decreased the special education allocation without a commensurate decrease in the need for services would push special education costs into local education spending. Under the current education funding formula, this could dramatically increase tax rates at the local level due to the rise of the per pupil spending.

Changes to the funding model alone are insufficient to address special education costs, given the significant shift of mental health services to schools that has occurred over time. The costs to schools of providing mental health services due to a lack of availability of those supports within the community is significant. Without addressing the human services and mental needs of our communities, the responsibility for funding the supports will continue to fall disproportionately towards schools, and the special education budget.

Finally, the VSBA strongly believes that any adjustments to the education system – especially those impacting funding - must not exacerbate the current inequities in our system. These reports provide us with a path to a better system for students and taxpayers, but we must ensure we take the time we need to plan a transition so that we avoid unintended consequences that undermine our commitments to ensure every student receives the resources and educational opportunities they need to learn and thrive.