

Testimony to the House Education Committee
Possible Committee Amendments to S.261
Thursday, April 19, 2018

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning on the amendment under consideration relative to S.261

Addressing childhood trauma is an important matter, and one that superintendents and the public education community realize is an important goal.

The manifestations of childhood trauma affect society, they affect our communities, and most significantly they affect our children.

That stated, I want to take the opportunity to speak very briefly about my concerns about the ever-expanding obligations that we are imposing on our public schools. I do so not as discouragement against the House Education Committee and General Assembly seeking to improve the response of our public, and publicly funded institutions, to compelling societal needs like addressing childhood trauma. I do so because I think the message is important, relevant and valid, and I have been granted your attention this morning.

Members of the public school community have long spoken about overburden in public schools. I think that they have a point.

The fact is, however, that most of the challenges that schools are asked to respond to are, in most cases, very compelling - among the most compelling challenges facing society today.

In this legislative session alone, there is an expansive of list of issues that are being taken up;

On Tuesday this week, my colleagues from some of the other education associations and I sent a communication to the education committee chairs and House and Senate Leaders titled **Education Overburden**. We listed what we know to be under active consideration by the General Assembly right now. Here is the list (we recognize that the list may be incomplete):

H.911 Overhaul of the education funding system
H.27 Protect students from sexual exploitation
H.897 Historic modifications to the special education funding and delivery system
H.923 School safety and security

- H.675 Restorative justice policies and practices
- H.910 Changes to the open meeting and public records laws
- S. 261 Mitigating childhood trauma and toxic stress
- S.229 Special education funding and practice for independent schools accepting public dollars
- H.919 Expansion of obligations for career and technical education centers and public schools
- H.922 CLA changes for unified districts
- S.257 Miscellaneous Ed. Bill
 - Modifications to PreK funding, delivery and administration
 - Radon mitigation
 - Afterschool programs
 - Ethnic studies standards and policies
 - Licensing of teachers

AND the potential exists for statewide school employee health insurance legislation emerging in the final weeks of the session.

We closed our message with these points:

Please keep in mind that while all these new requirements on public schools are being contemplated, we do not have a Secretary of Education, fiscal pressures are mounting, and we are headed into the final phase of Act 46 implementation, which is likely to require significant work at the local level to respond to governance changes required by the state.

We are concerned that the proliferation of new initiatives and requirements is fundamentally diminishing our ability to focus on the core mission of public education - ensuring high quality instruction and supports for every student.

As you head into the final weeks of the session, I did not want to let the opportunity pass to convey to you the points made above.

On a final note on that theme, I want to point out that I am increasingly noticing what I consider to be a growing divide in the way we regard our public institutions and the public resources that are used to support it.

With Act 166 and Act 77, preK education and post-secondary education were, in effect, appended to the K-12 education system. We already had a system that was comprised of public schools and independent schools - in some cases operating with different rules and requirements.

As the General Assembly has a commitment to equity and better use of resources, I think you would be well-advised to considering treating all entities supported mainly by public funds as similarly and as possible.

Thank you for allowing me to make those statements.

Now, with respect to H.261 and the amendments under consideration, I offer these comments:

- 1) Sec A - reference to the youth risk behavior survey - there is no objection to the notion of inclusion of trauma-related questions on the survey, but I want to note that I could find no reference to the content of the survey anywhere else in statute. So, in this case, I believe you would be expanding the statutes to incorporate a “may include” reference when no other specific topic area is referenced in statute. I would also note that, in general, the survey seeks information on risk behavior that students are, or are not, engaged in - not that they are exposed to. (But perhaps, I could stand corrected on that).
- 2) Sec B - no objection to a model plan but believe that the state should find ways to support trauma responses by schools other than requiring adoption of a plan as rigorous, or more rigorous than the model plan. On a minor point, I don't know what rigorous means in this context. On a major point, I don't think that adoption and posting of a plan by a school district assures quality of the plan or its implementation. That comes from training, resources, focus, etc and I think that comes with ongoing support from the State, other agencies and from the school system itself. So, I am discouraging the requirement for posting and suggesting that other areas of support and resources be emphasized.
- 3) Section C - the inclusion of the reference to “the relationship of brain development and early learning” within the minimum course of study statute (16 VSA 906) should be considered by the Committee. The minimum course of study provisions outline subject matter that you want students to learn - not the context or understanding in which you want teachers to teach it. I am not sure what is intended here, but if the intention is that teachers have information and context on the relationship of brain development and early learning, you should consider finding another place in the statutes to place it. If the intention is that students should learn about that as an area of study, you might consider including it in 16 VSA 131 - comprehensive health education.
- 4) Section F - Alignment of Designated Service Agencies and Supervisory Unions - I think this section envisions recommendations that contemplate change of boundaries and service areas. Someone in a greater position of authority than me should comment on the practicality of that - but I recommend that you test the practicality of changing the boundaries and service areas of designated and special service agencies before you ask the Agencies of Education and Human Services to engage in that work.
- 5) Section G - Trauma Informed Training for Educators - again, I may stand corrected on this, but I believe that the licensing requirements largely speak to requirements to demonstrate competency - not requirements for training in specific areas or subject matter per se. Regardless, the training emphasis and requirements as outlined in the section raise questions about time resources, money resources and all forms of

competing priorities. I think a better approach would be for the State to develop an array of high quality training opportunities in support of enhancements to trauma-informed systems and make those available to schools and other organizations, rather than focus on requirement for individual licensing. Also, regardless of whether you go the licensing route or some other route, pre-licensure training (academic preparation) should be explored.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.