

Testimony of Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association
Senate Education Committee
March 20, 2018

H. 897 – An Act Relating to Enhancing the Effectiveness, Availability, and Equity of Services to Students Who Require Additional Support

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

The focus of the current work of the Vermont Superintendents Association is on improving the systems through which education is delivered in Vermont and developing the most equitable systems we can achieve. The attainment of those goals will rely on doing things differently, and the UVM study and the District Management Group Report provide useful recommendations in that regard.

When deciding public policy, if decision makers have an opportunity to improve the utilization of monetary and human resources in support of better practice and greater efficiency, the opportunity should not be missed.

It is a relatively rare event when many parties of interest support a major change to a state funding system as early in the process as they have with this proposal.

The University of Vermont's Study of State Funding for Special Education provided useful information about prospects for changing the funding system and the benefits that could accrue, to students, to school systems and to the state overall.

The genesis of the evaluation of the funding systems was based in a belief that Vermont's current system of funding special education is not well-matched to best educational practices and most efficient use of resources.

In the UVM report, and in the response outlined by the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators, there are these recognitions:

- That while the current funding method has provided a predictable source of special education funding for districts and supervisory unions, the method is not well-aligned with other state policy priorities such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support.
- State and local education officials with specific expertise in special education believe that that the current formula and associated rules limit flexibility in how students are served and result in "siloed" services that are both less efficient and less student-centered.

- The current reimbursement model for funding special education services may incentivize the over-identification of students as special education eligible.
- Administrative costs and service are higher than they otherwise might be.

The report also calls for careful consideration of poverty adjustments in the context of the special education funding models and the necessity of an extraordinary cost reimbursement feature.

Very significantly, the report indicates that **“To achieve savings without potential harmful impacts for students, a move to a census-based funding mechanism must be tightly coupled with shifts in practice and service delivery models.”**

H. 897 incorporates the recommendations of the District Management Group Report titled “Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Support for Students Who Struggle.”

The DMG report presents findings on current practices in Vermont schools and makes recommendations for improving those practices.

In general, H. 897 (as we anticipate it will emerge from the House) is on point in that it:

- Emphasizes high quality core instruction supporting more additional instruction time and support for struggling learners from the most well-qualified educators
- Recommends changes to the special education funding system (to a census-block model) in support of better education practice
- Involves experts and practitioners from the field in achieving the system-wide changes envisioned within the bill (census-based funding advisory group)
- Provides necessary staff and resources to the Agency of Education
- Addresses the need for extraordinary special education cost reimbursement by retaining that component of the funding system
- Re-establishes the requirement for an education weighting report and provides funding to accomplish that work
- Provides for consulting services to support this work at the supervisory union/district level

The details of the aforementioned provisions will need attention as the Senate Education Committee considers the House-passed bill.

In addition, specific topics that should be carefully considered by your Committee include:

- Timing/phasing of the changes to the special education funding system
- Whether the Census-Based Funding Early Implementation Program is an essential component of the bill?
- What is the appropriate amount of the extraordinary cost reimbursement?
- How to adequately address important maintenance of effort considerations?
- How, given federal requirements around maintenance of fiscal support and maintenance of effort and expectations for better utilization of money and personnel resources, this bill should be considered in the context of “cost-containment?”
- Who is the appropriate authority to establish support grant amounts and related issues that will drive future monetary obligations of the state – the General Assembly or the State Board of Education?

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.