



To: Senate Education Committee
From: Nicole L. Mace, Executive Director
Re: H.897
Date: April 3, 2018

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.897. 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 UVM 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.

The VSBA has had and continues to have concerns about staffing capacity at the Agency of Education. The House bill does increase the capacity at the Agency of Education to support changes in practice statewide, and we strongly support the inclusion of those positions.

Consensus indicates that, in order to be done well, this transition must occur over a five-year period. The House bill sets up a process for the type of examination and review required in order to understand which funding models and assumptions fit best in Vermont and the implications on the ground of such a shift. This study should include 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 will push special education costs into local education spending. Under the current education funding formula, this would dramatically increase tax rates at the local level due to the rise of per pupil spending.

I have seen and heard comments from committee members expressing concern that under a census-based model school districts would be free to spend funds previously dedicated to special education on other district priorities such as facility upgrades. Federal law prevents school districts from failing to provide the services required in students' IEPs, so I believe this fear is misplaced.

One concern we have raised during this process is how changes to the education funding formula, which may take effect in FY 2019, will interact with the changes contemplated in H.897. Will current inequities between districts be exacerbated? The VSBA believes that any adjustments to the education system – especially those impacting funding - must not exacerbate the current inequities in our system.

Furthermore, eliminating funding that requires a shift in practice in order to ensure there is no impact on children may well work in districts that have strong, stable leadership, cohesive governance structures, educators with a commitment to evolving their practice, and parents working in partnership with the LEA to modify IEPs. What will happen in districts that do not have those assets? What safeguards are there in this bill to prevent harm to children, families, and communities?

The UVM and DMG 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.

Finally, I want to strongly encourage the committee to hear from special education directors and superintendents in LEA's that work with independent schools. Over the past two days, I have been made aware that there are serious concerns and issues associated with implementing both a census model for public schools and a reimbursement model in independent schools. Further analysis and testimony is required.

