

Testimony on January 18, 2017 from Ken Page, VPA Executive Director regarding the rule making authority of the State Board of Education

For the record, I am Ken Page with the Vermont Principals' Association. Thank you for inviting me to comment about the rule making authority of the State Board of Education.

As some of you know, this is my 44th year in education, 36 years as a teacher and principal; I am now in my 8th and final year as the VPA Executive Director. We all know how time flies, and as I look back to my short history in working with the Vermont legislature, I relocated my testimony from February 26, 2013 taking about S. 91, which was an act relating to public funding of some approved independent schools. This bill that we considered four years ago bears a striking resemblance to some of the same issues we are still working on today.

I am here today to let you know that VPA is in a unique position because we have both public school leaders and independent school leaders as members of our association. The last time I presented on this topic, I remember feeling like a duck out of water, not quite understanding the problem and wondering what I could add to the conversation. Although, at the time, all eyes were on independent schools with some thinking they were intentionally excluding students, it seemed to me then that all eyes should have been on the public money that was going to independent schools and on the few conditions that were attached to it. I contended at the time that independent schools should not be blamed because, others failed to put conditions on the use of public dollars. But, that was in 2013. However, it's now 2017, and the issues are now political; they continue to be about power and authority, and they continue to engender distrust among all parties. So, let's call a time out, and step back to rethink things.

Certainly, the Vermont State Board of Education has an obligation to promulgate rules for both public and independent schools. They also have an obligation to see all perspectives and to recognize that independent schools have not purposely excluded students. Likewise, independent schools, although mission driven, have an obligation to consider equity above all else; and whether intentional or not, there exists right now what I am calling "an appearance of exclusion," and, clearly, that needs to be corrected. But, in addition to saying that both sides need to play nice, I want to be entirely clear. We agree with those who have called this a "civil rights imperative," and that we must protect the rights of every student to have equal opportunity and access to education."

Here is where I need to make a full disclosure that in 1966, I was Connecticut farm kid who did not attend my local high school; instead, I was a day student on scholarship at a local prep school. It was an important value to my parents that I attend Cheshire Academy, and it was an opportunity to learn in this academic setting, to play sports with accomplished athletes and to get a more worldly view. So, since I have been a student in a private school and I have spent my entire working career in public schools, I think this gives me a great vantage point.

When I testified back in 2013 about S. 91, I questioned if the bill was related to declining enrollment at public schools OR public schools having to provide special ed services for kids in all 11 categories when independent schools do not, OR if there is competition between schools for the most talented kids OR if the concern is related to size of school budgets Or if it was purely an equity issue? Or if it recognized that contentious relationship existed between some public schools and some independent schools? I concluded then that it was about all of these. However, privately to myself, I also thought it was about a lack of trust and about self-interest and I knew that it diverted us from our real purpose.

What I know is this: those of us who have spent a lifetime working in schools are guided by what is right for the child. Above all, we need to be equitable and lawful and we should not waver in our desire to work together and to have mutual respect for each other.

So, as I see it, with regards to this issue, we have lost perspective and empathy here and the entire State of Vermont is watching as public and independent schools take on each other for the prize of who is right. Somehow, we have taken what was entirely a kid issue and have made it wholly an adult issue. And, as we know about most adult issues, money is at the center of everyone's actions and comments.

I want to say a word about the delivery of special education services, which may be a central issue here. Before the passage of Public Law 94-142 in the late 70's students with special needs were largely not served. As a reading teacher at U-32 High School, my reading classes were full of very bright kids who learned differently. I also learned that regular classroom teachers, who are educated about learning styles and can figure out how kids learn best, could make a huge difference. And, I knew even back then that the greatest impediment for success was when kids felt that adults simply wouldn't give them a chance.

Of course kids with special learning needs sometimes need specialized instruction, but throughout Vermont, right now, most students on IEPs are in regular classes for the majority of their days. I have read that 70% of independent schools have special education services and, therefore we are talking about helping the 30% who don't now offer services to begin to do so. There are some promising signs that we have started to listen to each other, to find common ground and to build respect.

As many of you know, sometimes we can build alliances through student sports and activities. Although I am not proposing that the independent and public schools play each other in a basketball game. However, we can instead take our lessons from sports. Independent and public schools regularly participate in many VPA sponsored sports and activities together, and often sit down to discuss issues when there are disagreements. We have even allowed kids to play on the teams of other schools when they want to play a sport that their school does not offer, or allow teams to form cooperative teams when neither team can field enough players for a team. So, if we can make it work for kids through sports and activities, why can't this be a model of cooperation for other educational issues? A great example of this is our annual state X Country meet at Thetford Academy. Anyone who has ever attended knows that the tremendous outpouring of support for all athletes public and independent is truly a sight to behold and a model of cooperation of public and independent with total involvement of the Thetford community.

We need a fresh set of eyes on this. Let's acknowledge that first and foremost, we believe in equity for all. Anything less will only lead to the prolonged belief that there are discriminatory practices in our schools and this will extend the "appearance of exclusion." Once we acknowledge what the desired state is for all of our schools should be, then let's set the wheels in motion. If changes need to be made, let's give people and schools time to adjust and support to make these changes. In reading over the testimonies from headmasters, they appear to be asking for assistance to help them make the changes that will position their schools to move forward. My hope is that we have the courage to move forward together, that we always keep kids right in the middle, and that our work signals to our kids how responsible adults can solve problems together.

Thank you.

