

Testimony of Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director
Vermont Superintendents Association
January 19, 2018

Senate Education Committee

S.233 - Mandatory Age of School Attendance to Age 18

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S.233 - a bill, which, if enacted, would increase the mandatory age of school attendance to 18 years of age, in half year increments, ending on July 1, 2021.

At a meeting of Vermont's school superintendents yesterday, we devoted some time to a discussion of S.233. No formal position on the bill was taken and the results of the discussion were not conclusive. Approximately 35 superintendents participated.

It is fair to say that within the discussion, several themes emerged. Each theme could, and should, be examined in greater detail. Time at the meeting did not allow for that, so please consider these comments to be preliminary.

One theme centered on the need for research findings from other states related to the efficacy of laws and regulations that have the mandatory age of attendance at age 18. If the Committee wishes to consider this bill further, it would be useful to have legislative counsel undertake an effort to obtain that research. Along those lines, given that one objective for changing the age of mandatory attendance to age 18 would presumably be to increase graduation rates, Vermont data on graduation and dropouts should be examined in the context of this proposed legislation.

A second theme reiterated the often-heard suggestion that the General Assembly resist the temptation to pass more new laws addressing education until school districts and school personnel have had more time to fully implement the laws and regulations with which they are currently contending. Act 46, Act 77 and Act 166 are commonly referenced in conjunction with that line of thinking, but other requirements and changes associated with state and federal laws are also placing demands on schools and school personnel.

The second theme is complicated by an education funding dynamic in which school districts are being asked to both contain costs and expand mission. Given current factors, we are expecting intensified focus on cost-containment considerations.

A third theme centered on the efficacy of the education and judicial systems in terms of implementation of a change in mandatory age of attendance. Some superintendents observed that matters of truancy are not treated as priorities within the judicial and human services

systems, making enforcement of truancy laws challenging. Others commented on the variability in truancy prevention/response programs from place to place. These factors are challenging under current law, and will presumably become more so if the attendance age is changed to 18.

A fourth theme focused on the importance of the education system educating every child equitably, well and with an emphasis on the aspirations, aptitudes and interests of that child. Logically, this can be better accomplished if a student is required to be in school for more, rather than less time.

Increasing the age of mandatory attendance would seem to provide for more opportunities and time with which to support a student through public education, but it remains to be seen, considering the points outlined above, whether the better way to accomplish this is through mandating attendance until the age of 18. A more effective response might be to continue to devote resources to addressing the goals for a proficiency-based education system and flexible pathways - which are current policies that the public education system responding to.

Additionally, superintendents noted that this change would necessitate a review of other laws and regulations such as those for adult basic education and high school completion programs. This change, for example, could impact funding for adult basic education and change the availability of services for at-risk students. This would not constitute a negative result - but it is the type of result that should be understood in the overall context of the delivery system.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these initial comments.