



Vermont Independent
Schools Association

Testimony to Senate Education Committee, Re: S.257

Mill Moore, Executive Director
February 27, 2018

I am here to address the provisions in the sections of S.257 that would delete the long-standing provision in Vermont law allowing students from school choice districts to attend any approved independent school of their choice, anywhere in the world. Instead, tuition support would be available only to independent schools within Vermont or within 25 miles of the Vermont border.

I wish to begin by quoting three lines from Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*:

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.*

Using the AOE's most recently available tuitioning data, I can tell you that had the proposal been in effect in FY16, it would have walled in the full-time equivalent of **53 Vermont students** attending 36 different independent schools beyond the 25-mile limit from the border.

Had all 53 of those students remained within Vermont, this proposal **would have caused a net increase in Ed Fund spending of \$1,200 per student**, presuming those students attended their nearest public school.

Some of these students were attending well known independent boarding schools. Others however were attending unusual programs not otherwise available here in Vermont.

Here are some examples drawn from the tuitioning data files over the last four years:

- ♦ Every year at least one Vermont student receives tuition support while attending an overseas school in an international exchange program. Nations involved in these exchanges in the last few years include Austria, France, Japan and Sweden.
- ♦ Tuition support has enabled students from Washington and from Kirby to attend performing arts high schools in Colorado and in California.

- ♦ A student from Marlboro went over to Maine to attend a one-semester experiential outdoor learning program for international students.
- ♦ Two years ago a student from Manchester was receiving tuition support while attending a residential addiction treatment center in Utah.
- ♦ Students from Londonderry and Wells attended the Carrabassett Valley Academy in Kingfield, Maine in 2015. This is a high-level ski academy similar to Burke Mountain Academy.
- ♦ In 2012, a student from Chittenden attended a high school program within the University of North Carolina School of Dance and a student from Hartland attended a therapeutic school for boys with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Any of these opportunities would be shut off by a ban on out-of-state tuitioning.

I am very aware that some legislators feel disquiet when they see public funds paying part of the tuition at some famous out-of-state boarding schools. Perhaps intuitively it seems that students at these schools are getting a special deal, available only to the wealthy and privileged.

Nobody gets a full ride from public tuition. Every student attending an out-of-state independent school receives exactly the same tuition support as students attending most in-state independent schools. In the upcoming school year that will be \$15,618 for grades 7 through 12. This limit is set by statute. It is computed from the statewide average of all union high schools' announced tuitions.

We do not means-test education in Vermont. Family wealth is not considered. I don't hear anyone complaining when the children of wealthy families attend public schools, funded entirely by taxpayer dollars.

Our state entitles every resident student to a publicly-supported education, no matter their family's situation. When a school choice student gets a \$15,618 state commitment, it may be used for an in-state school or an out of state school, public or independent. There's no difference. That's their educational entitlement.

On the other hand, well-known independent schools have financial aid programs. Not only do they means-test families, *they actively encourage lower income applicants*. If a scholarship grant isn't enough, perhaps the additional amount from the public entitlement will be enough to permit a child from a lower-income family to attend a school that otherwise might be out of reach.

Overall then, the “walling in” of S.257 accomplishes three things that we think are unfortunate:

- ◆ It prevents students from participating in programs such as international exchanges or specialty programs unavailable within Vermont.
- ◆ It blocks families from using out-of-state rehabilitation programs for students whose need may not have risen to the level that would trigger special education eligibility.
- ◆ And, the bill prevents students from low and middle-income families from taking advantage of the financial aid programs offered by out-of-state independent boarding schools.

Additionally, I have two recommendations:

- ◆ Grandfather the enrollments of students now attending schools beyond the 25-mile limit through their high school graduation. The one-year limit now in the bill seems petty and unfair.
- ◆ Prevent confusion between state and federal policies by acknowledging in the bill that federal special education law pre-empts an out-of-state spending ban when students with disabilities are attending out-of-state schools under a Vermont IEP.

◆ ◆ ◆