



Vermont
Superintendents
Association



August 26, 2020

To: House Education Committee

From: Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director, Vermont School Boards Association
Chelsea Myers, Associate Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association
Jay Nichols, Executive Director, Vermont Principals' Association
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Re: Legislative Asks Related to the Reopening of Schools

On behalf of our organizations and our members, we would like to thank you for inviting us to speak to your committee on the current status of reopening schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and legislative actions that would positively benefit schools during this time.

School boards and administrators have been working tirelessly to responsibly navigate the safe reopening of schools on September 8. This includes, contending with evolving health and safety guidance; competing concerns from families, staff and community members; operational and logistical challenges; and the significant academic, developmental, and social needs of the students they serve.

At this time, we have recommendations for your committee to consider to ensure school districts have the financial stability and support to safely reopen schools in September and to address other issues facing public education.

Our recommendations:

1. Our Associations recommend that, in light of the Governor's order to delay the opening of school until September 8, 2020, that for the 2020/2021 school year only, the required 175 student days set forth in 16 VSA be reduced to 170 days. This modification will relieve districts from the obligation to find ways to make up the five days that would have been fulfilled had school started as originally scheduled.

2. At the end of June, the General Assembly set aside \$100 million of Coronavirus Relief Funds to help K-12 schools with the costs of reopening schools during the pandemic and to address a deficit in the Education Fund. The Governor's budget does not include money to help schools deal with reopening costs amid the Covid-19 crisis. If the federal Coronavirus Relief Funds are not used to pay for these unbudgeted costs of reopening schools, districts will be operating in a deficit which will need to be addressed in the following year's budget, leading to a spike in property taxes and potentially drastic cuts to spending at a time when students will need additional academic, social, and emotional support.

VSA has begun to collect information regarding the costs associated with reopening schools. It is becoming clear that the estimates will likely exceed the original allocation for reimbursement, though more information needs to be collected. Furthermore, many business managers and superintendents have reported uncertainty about what is considered an allowable cost. Given the go ahead this summer to do what it takes to safely reopen schools in the fall, districts have purchased protective equipment and cleaning supplies; increased their technological capabilities; hired additional staff, such as custodians, school nurses, and substitute teachers; and committed to providing childcare for their employees while their children are in remote learning. They have not yet been reimbursed for these expenses and have significant concerns about operating at a deficit leading up to an extraordinarily difficult budget season. As a secondary factor, in many cases, it is unclear to the field how to be proactive and supportive of the efforts to use federal funds to address the Education Fund shortfall.

We respectfully request that the General Assembly proceed with its original plan for the 100 million dollars which were set aside for K-12 education. The Agency of Education and the Administration have strongly encouraged school leaders to procure the equipment and hire the personnel needed to reopen safely, with the understanding that Coronavirus Relief Funds would be available to reimburse districts for the associated costs. A change in course requiring local taxpayers to pick up the costs could disrupt reopening plans already in place. In particular, more systems may determine that it is safest to move in the direction of remote learning, which would have additional implications for the reopening of Vermont's economy.

3. Local school district officials are very concerned about reductions in equalized

pupil counts for FY2022 attributable to declines in enrollment in the current school year resulting from decisions by families to homeschool or enroll students in private schools and other factors that will lead to decreased enrollment.

A survey earlier this month by the Vermont Superintendents Association indicates that, with 46 superintendents responding, 85 percent (39 superintendents) are either very concerned (25 superintendents) or concerned (14 superintendent) about declines in enrollment in the current year due to COVID-19 dynamics. This concern is shared by other school officials.

As you and other legislators are keenly aware, a decline in equalized pupils will translate to an increase in education spending per equalized pupil and increased tax rates at the very time when schools need to both invest in learning opportunities for students and are contending with the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

The importance of the General Assembly taking action on this issue in August stems from the fact that school districts will receive equalized pupil counts in December to inform FY2022 budget deliberations and preparation. By December 15, budget development work is nearing completion with budgets slated for finalization in January so that they can be warned and presented to voters in March.

This year, more than ever, districts need a stable environment for their budget development process (FY2022) and a decrease in equalized pupils resulting from COVID-19 effects will be tremendously destabilizing.

Our Associations recommend that 16 VSA 4010 be amended to establish a one year hold harmless protection against declines in equalized pupils in order to stabilize budget development for FY2022.

Additional Observations:

1. In an August 5 letter to the House and Senate Education Committees, the superintendents/directors serving Vermont's three technical center school districts informed legislators that they had learned from the Vermont Agency of Education that under current law those districts are not eligible for federal COVID-19 Relief Funding.

It was later announced that the entirety of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (\$4 million) will be directed to Career and Technical Education.

Our Associations believe strongly that the technical center school districts should be granted sufficient funding for the reopening of schools through one of the available federal funding sources.

2. Our Associations have heard concerns from members that receive revenue through tuition dollars paid by so-called 'choice districts' in Vermont. We have not surveyed receiving districts about this concern, but we are hearing from school officials about anticipated revenue shortfalls in districts accustomed to receiving tuition revenues where those revenues are expected to decrease due to COVID-19 related enrollment decisions. To the extent that anticipated revenues do decline, operating deficits will likely occur. It may not be necessary for the General Assembly to consider this issue in the August session, but it is a situation that may require further inquiry from the field.
3. In June, the Legislature created a \$6.5 million [School Indoor Air Quality Grant Program](#), funded through the Coronavirus Relief Fund, to help schools repair and upgrade their heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems to meet COVID-19 specific guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration, and Air Conditioning Engineers.

It has been reported that approximately 300 schools are interested in applying for the grant and that project prices vary, with many in the \$40,000 - \$60,000 per school range. At \$40,000 per project, 300 schools would need \$12 million and at \$60,000 per project, 300 schools would need \$18 million. We are bringing this to your attention because ventilation and air filtration are a major concern when considering whether or not to reopen a school for in-person instruction and current information indicates that more funds are needed to allow schools to meet the CDC guidelines. For more information, we refer you to pages 24-25 of the [Strong and Healthy Start Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools](#) issued jointly by the Vermont Agency of Education and Department of Health.

Thank you very much for your consideration.